THE DARK CENTURY: 1946 – 2046

Noir, Cyberpunk, and Asian Modernity

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Abstract

From US-occupied Japan in 1946, to the end of two systems between China and Hong Kong in 2046, noir as an artistic and philosophical discourse has provided powerful insights into the impact of modernity across Southeast and East Asia. *The Dark Century 1946 – 2046* is a dissertation in two parts—an essay and a work of fiction—that analyses under-explored noir, neo-noir, and cyberpunk narratives in film and literature. The research approach is multidisciplinary, incorporating creative practice, textual analysis, critical theory, and cultural studies. I argue that noir, neo-noir, and cyberpunk share a philosophical lineage, and provide a counter-hegemonic discourse on modernity.

While noir has found distinct local expressions in film and fiction, what links the global experience of seemingly disparate nations, East and West, is a context of rapid development, cultural loss, the alienating forces of economic capital, and the corrupt rule of a Leviathan state. Through examination of seminal works of transnational noir, I identify four archetypes within the noir discourse – Android, Gunslinger, Samurai, and the Private Eye – and argue they provide compelling and consistent insights into the impact of modernity across radically different cultures. Working from this basis, I propose a new definition of the narrative form. I also delineate the local noir traditions for four countries underrepresented in noir scholarship: Japan, Hong Kong, Australia and Vietnam.

The creative artefact, *Thirty-Six Streets*, is a science-fiction noir thriller that aims to realise some of the noir themes relevant to transnational noir in general, and Vietnam in particular. The novel is focalised through Lin 'The Silent One' Vu, a gangster and sometime private investigator. Born in Vietnam, raised in Australia, everywhere an outsider; she lives in Chinese-occupied Hanoi, in the steaming, paranoid alleyways of the Old Quarter – known as the Thirty-Six Streets. Lin is drawn into the grand conspiracies of the neon gods: of regimes and mega-corporations, as they unleash dangerous new technologies in a quest for absolute power.

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Chapter One – Android, Gunslinger, Private Eye, Samurai: *Modernity's Antagonists*

Definitional Debates

Classic noir is normally understood in filmic terms, and its various standard definitions include a femme fatale, corrupt elite, a bleak ending; lots of shadow and skewed camera angles, and cigarette smoke. The most memorable noir characters are hardboiled private detectives – Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) in the *Maltese Falcon*, Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in *Chinatown*, Harrison Ford as 'Blade Runner' Richard Deckard (not a private eye as such, but not a cop, either) in the movie of the same name. This essay argues that, with the exception of a corrupt elite, none of these characteristics define noir.

Raymond Chandler, in his famous essay on hardboiled fiction, *The Simple Art of Murder*, puts forward the conception of the hard-boiled protagonist as modern knight-errant:

> down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is a hero…He must be, to use a weathered phrase, a man of honor…He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (Chandler, 1988, p. 18)

Subsequently, the ‘knight-errant’ claim has been the go-to for many critics looking for a pithy phrase to define the noir hero. However, in reviewing many of the seminal protagonists throughout the history of noir and cyberpunk, this proposition falters.

Raymond Chandler may have believed the knight-errant claim to be true for his own work, but the argument was made in the context of him exploring and defining hard-boiled fiction and its creator, Dashiell Hammett (Chandler, 1988). As modern noir writer James Ellroy argues:

> Hammett’s vision is exponentially more complex than that of his near-contemporary Raymond Chandler. Chandler wrote the man he wanted to be – gallant and suffused with a lovely satirist’s wit. Hammett wrote the man he feared he might be – tenuous and sceptical in all human dealings, corruptible and addicted to violent intrigue. (Ellroy, 2007, p. ix)

As Ellroy notes, the claim of ‘knight-errant’ does not even hold true for the characters created by Dashiell Hammett. The latter’s first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929), is rooted in the real-life events of labour unrest and industrialization. The protagonist, The Continental Op, is a ‘hired man’ used to protect society from crooks and gangsters, yet at the same time an instrument of the venal and corrupt, protecting their rule. As Steven Marcus argues in his introduction to *The Continental Op:* “In Hammett’s depiction of modern American society, violence is the decisive means indeed, along with fraud, deceit, treachery, betrayal, and general endemic unscrupulousness. Such means are in no sense alien to Hammett’s detective” (Marcus, 1992, pp. xxvi - xxvii).

In examining the history of noir and cyberpunk that follows the hardboiled era, it is difficult to argue that the hero is ‘neither tarnished nor afraid’, or ‘honourable’, and ‘not himself mean’. Rick Deckard, for example, is an alcoholic who kills a woman in the course of his duties: “*The report read ‘Routine retirement of a Replicant.’ That didn't make me feel any*

better about shooting a woman in the back." In *Red Harvest*, the Continental Op admits to being driven 'blood simple' (a phrase the Coen Brothers later used as the title of their 1985 neo-noir), desiring nothing more than revenge on those who wronged him, and to have anarchy loosed upon the town he was tasked to clean up. In the bleak Australian sunshine noir, *The Proposition*, the anti-hero is Charlie Burns, a criminal who may have engaged in acts of barbaric criminality with his two brothers (the movie never clarifies his role, though it leads the viewer to suspect he was involved). Charlie later kills his brother, Arthur, as he is about to murder the local police captain and rape his wife. Charlie is drunk, emaciated, and haunted throughout the film; his inner emotional life is hidden from the viewer.

The struggle of the hardboiled protagonist – and that of the noir and cyberpunk anti-heroes who followed – is not to be good, or chivalrous. These protagonists are frequently alcoholics or gambling addicts; law breakers partial to extrajudicial killing, they sleep with married women (and men), and are often indifferent to the pain of others. Noir heroes are frequently cruel, selfish, and violent. They are all most certainly 'tarnished'. Nor is the plight of the noir protagonist, as Dolores Martinez argues, "The struggle to be a good man in uncertain times" (Martinez, 2015, p. 42). Rather, the noir protagonist's struggle is to act *authentically* in the existentialist sense of refusing to bow to social forces and adopt values they despise; refusing at every turn to disown their freedom; never taking the easy road.

Noir is both a response to, and an articulation of, the disruption of modernity. Hyun S. Park, in his essay on Korean film noir, 'Allegorizing Noir: Violence, Body and Space in the Postwar Korean Film Noir', identifies the specific problem of global economics, arguing – along with James Naremore, whom he references – that noir critiques the 'dark side of savage capitalism' (Park, 2015). Fay and Nieland write that film noir is the product of the unequal development of modernity as a global force:

> Our story of noir's internationalism is thus linked to the broader condition of global disquiet with the mobile and dislocated cultural relations of modernity itself: of rootless and wandering desire; of chance, accident, and class instability; of local traditions and spaces either imperilled or energized by global flows of culture and capital, and of homelife across the world that has become unsettled, uncanny, or foreign. (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. xiii)

Therefore, "Film noir is at once one of cultural globalization's most eloquent critics and one of its very best examples" (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. xiv).

James Naremore's seminal *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (first published in 1998) put to rest the notion that noir is a genre, persuasively arguing that it is a discourse (Shin & Gallagher, 2015, p. 3). Naremore writes: "We need to understand that film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; in other words, it has less to do with a group of artefacts than with a discourse" (Naremore, 2008, p. 11). However, Naremore expands on this in the introduction to Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir*, suggesting noir could also be considered a 'category', because "cycles and movements are more short-lived, and genres, though much less stable than historians make them seem, are somewhat easier to delineate" (Spicer, 2002, p. xix). Paul Schrader, in his influential essay *Notes on Film Noir*, argues, "It is not defined, as are the western and gangster movies, by conventions of setting and conflict but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (Schrader, 1972, p. 230).

Noir and its descendants cannot be identified by a simple box-ticking exercise. Yet, when key scholars of noir discuss it variously as discourse, tone, or mood, pinning it down can become an exercise in subjectivity. Nonetheless, I argue it *can* be pinned down, and that significant themes link noir and cyberpunk over several decades and multiple cultures. I agree with the 'revisionist' impulse of Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002), that challenges "a major strand of

the construction of film noir that defined it as an exclusively American phenomenon" (Spicer, 2002, p. 3). I strongly agree with Naremore that noir is a discourse – though classify it as a specifically anti-hegemonic discourse – and agree it is defined by mood and tone. But the definition does not end there; all these strands are important components, though not the totality.

While stylised aesthetics can be seen from *The Maltese Falcon*, through to *Blade Runner*, to *Ghost in the Shell*, they are noticeably absent from many others. Numerous examples of local noirs across the globe have no tradition of replicating the aesthetics of the classic noirs. Australia, for example, unquestionably has a noir tradition, though the imagery associated with it has always been social realist, rather than the stylised realism of classic noir. This is true for film – such as *The Rover,* and for literature – such as Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore*. Hong Kong film, on the other hand, tends to showcase bombastic, stylised action sequences that have little to do with reality, for example the fluttering doves and slow motion, balletic gunplay made famous by John Woo. Vietnam is closer to Australia in its grittiness, perhaps even surpassing it, with novels such as the unrelentingly bleak *The Sorrow of War*.

Aesthetically, there is little to link these disparate countries except for one point: the environment. Whether the unrelenting heat of Australian sunshine noir, or the labyrinthine and rain-soaked alleyways of Hong Kong or Tokyo, noir and cyberpunk have been marked by extremes in climatic conditions.

Sue Matheson discusses this in 'The West Hardboiled':

> In the hardboiled tradition, the connection between characters and milieu is extremely important because the states of the inner world, the mind and emotions, are transmitted by expressionist techniques of exaggerated or distorted representations of the outer

> world. Thus, in film noir, claustrophobic rooms, labyrinthine alleyways, and dripping dank cities act as metaphors that reflect the psychological conditions of their protagonists. (Matheson, 2005, p. 890)

In essence, Matheson argues, 'the wilderness without is the wilderness within.'

These observations could consistently and credibly be expanded to the noir and cyberpunk texts explored by this essay. Thus, in *Blade Runner*, there is the rain, pollution, eternal night, rooms dripping with moisture, city streets choked with traffic; thus in the Australian Sunshine Noir film *The Rover,* the protagonist endures a blistering, inescapable heat. All noir literature and film – whether the darkest, wettest night lit only by neon signs, or the unendurable noonday sun in the brutal expanse of an Australian desert – convey essentially the same internal disposition of the protagonist: desolation and alienation**.**

This essay defines noir and its descendants as having a mood and tone that is fatalistic and bleak (Schrader, 1972). The protagonist of the noir film or novel is in a psychological state of alienation (Fay & Nieland, 2009): alienated from the society around them, and even alienated from themselves through plot devices such as amnesia or advanced technology. This psychological state is often represented by extreme weather conditions, in particular perpetual rain or inescapable heat, revealing the internal desolation of the protagonist (Matheson, 2005).

Noir narratives almost always involve corruption (Ellroy, 2007; Marcus, 1992), both in the superstructures of society, and of the individuals compromised by these structures. Related is the unchecked power of the state or corporation, and the inability of the individual to resist this power. Finally, and most importantly, noir discourse critiques modernity and its analogues, in particular economic capital and technology (Fay & Nieland, 2009; Park, 2015; Shin & Gallagher, 2015).

Literature Review – East and Southeast Asian Noir

> *'noir qualities' can be decoupled from classical canons and adapted into cinematic products from radically different histories, cultural backgrounds and even political agendas. In fact, film noir can be construed as part of the broader cultural response to modernity in the context of the twentieth-century history of global social change.*
>
> Kyu Hyun Kim – East Asian Film Noir

Noir through to cyberpunk, in literature and film, possesses an identifiable lineage that remains consistent across theme, mood and tone. The origins of noir – and therefore neo-noir and cyberpunk – are transnational. From 1946, when the term 'noir' was first coined by French critic Nino Frank (Fay & Nieland, 2009; Naremore, 2008; Schrader, 1972; Weaving, 2014), to the future imagined by Hong Kong director Wong Kai-Wai in his film *2046*, noir has been explicitly an international literary and cinematic object.

As argued by Philippa Lovatt*:*

> Noir was transnational from the very beginning. Drawing on several cinematic traditions including German expressionism and French poetic realism, and combining them with the dark humour and brutality of the hardboiled pulp fiction of American writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, film noir has always been characterized by a sense of hybridity. (Lovatt, 2015, p. 183)

There is a limited, yet growing, number of academic works that focus on East Asian Noir. One of the most comprehensive is very recent – Mark Gallagher & Chi-Yun Shin's *East Asian Film Noir: Transnational Encounters and Inter-cultural Dialogue* (2015). This text argues that Japan, South Korea and China have been "excluded from circuits of global-noir

traffic past and present" (Gallagher, 2015, p. 2). It further argues that mainstream academic and critical discourse of film noir continues to omit East Asian filmmakers. As objects of academic study, noir, neo-noir and, in particular, cyberpunk have been underutilised or ignored as areas to study the impact of modernity in an Asian context.

Akira Kurosawa (Japan) and John Woo (Hong Kong) have attracted the most literature on East Asian noir. Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well (1960), High and Low (1963), Stray Dog (1949)*, *Drunken Angel (1948),* and *Yojimbo (1961)* as forms of classic noir (Fay & Nieland, 2009; Martinez, 2015), and Woo's neo-noirs *A Better Tomorrow (1986), The Killer (1989), Bullet in the Head (1990*), and *Hard Boiled (1992)* (Desser, 2002; Fay & Nieland, 2009; Willis, 2015) being the most prominent examples.

James Naremore's *More Than Night* was influential in branching out from purely American or Euro-centric takes on noir, and included discussion of Asian influences and filmmakers. However, it tends to focus on the orientalist depiction of East Asia in US cinema, rather than films noirs made by East Asian artists. The exception is a brief discussion of Akira Kurosawa, and the work of Hong Kong's Wong Kar-Wai (Naremore, 2008, pp. 225 - 229). *Neo Noir* (2009), edited by Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre, and Greg Tuck also treats neo-noir as an expressly international phenomenon, and includes a chapter by Hyangjin Lee – 'The Shadow of Outlaw in Asia Noir: Hiroshima, Hong Kong, and Seoul' – in which she argues the form represents a critique of capitalism and a changing social order (H. Lee, 2009). David Desser's chapter in Barry Keith Grant's *Film Genre Reader III* – 'Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism' makes an effort to explore the global phenomenon of film noir, rejecting Naremore's tendency to relate Asian work back to European influences, and rather emphasises local concerns – for example the 1997 Handover in Hong Kong (Desser, 2002, p. 526).

While *A Companion to Film Noir* (2013) does include discussion of the new geographies of film noir, East Asia is relegated to a single chapter (of 29) – 'Film Noir in Asia: Historicizing South Korean Crime Thrillers', by Nikki J Y Lee and Julian Stringer. Tan See Kam and Gina Marchetti explore Hong Kong cinema as editors of *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: no film is an island* (2007), and include two chapters specifically on East Asian noir. In one of these Joelle Collier argues persuasively that the trope of the femme fatale has been replaced in Hong Kong cinema with the monstrous father, a character that represents a critique of patriarchy in a Confucian society (Collier, 2007).

Stephen Teo adapts Naremore's seminal *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* to Asian film in his essay 'Darker than Dark: Film Noir in its Asian Contexts' (2014). He argues that the academic field has largely focussed on film noir as a US phenomenon: "the literature on noir has overwhelmingly concentrated on the films produced by the classical Hollywood studio system which established the kinds of genres (the detective film, the gangster film, or the crime film) that came under the noir rubric" (Teo, 2014, p. 141) Furthermore, he writes, the "ever-increasing volumes of scholarship of noir predicated on American contextual studies can in effect be subjected to a hegemonic impulse marginalising the achievements of Asian films noirs" (Teo, 2014, p. 152). However, while Teo maintains that international noir can "spring out of a particular cinema's own conventions and genres, and it seems unnecessary to connect it to a prior cinema with its own noir tradition" (Teo, 2014, p. 141), he nonetheless suggests his essay lacks the room to explore the "social, political, historical, cultural and nationalistic dimensions of film noir in its Asian contexts and I leave these areas of research for future scholars to pursue" (Ibid.).

Of the texts listed above, none mention either Australia or Vietnam (except the introduction to *A Companion to Film Noir*, which briefly mentions Australian noir as an example of the

internationality of the form, and then proceeds to ignore it for the remainder of the book. I will return to this point later). Moreover, the academic studies listed above focus almost exclusively on film noir, and are primarily concerned with film theory (i.e. with defining noir) and to a lesser extent, the local cultural context. While my essay will attempt to address the latter, it will also analyse how noir as a discourse critiques geopolitical trends and modernity. With few exceptions – a notable example being Fay and Nieland's *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (2009) – this academic space has been under-explored.

The clear lineage of cyberpunk to noir has also been overlooked, or sidelined, by academics. For example, the seminal *Blade Runner* (1982) – considered the first cyberpunk film – is not even mentioned in James Naremore's *More Than Night*. Fay and Nieland ignore cyberpunk completely in *Hard-Boiled Modernity*, a glaring omission given *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* have 'hard-boiled modernity' and the 'cultures of globalization' as central themes. Rare exceptions in the relevant literature are Gallagher and Chi-Yun Shi, who acknowledge the influence of *Blade Runner* on East Asian noir (Shin & Gallagher, 2015), and devote an entire chapter to *Ghost in the Shell* (North, 2015). Andrew Spicer's exhaustive *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir* (2010) does include *Blade Runner* variously as 'noir hybrid', 'future noir' and 'tech noir' and calls it an "exceptionally influential film visually and thematically" (Spicer, 2010, p. 19), although *Ghost in the Shell* is omitted completely, as is any discussion of cyberpunk.

This essay argues noir and its descendants are adapted (and adaptive) to varied temporal and cultural contexts. The most important points of commonality are urbanisation and economic development: the 'creative destruction' of capitalism that has worked its way from West to

East. Shin and Gallagher argue the experience of economic modernisation has given creators fertile ground to create noir narratives:

> The urban focus of much classical noir finds ready parallels in many East Asian noirs across historical periods. Expanding cities such as Seoul and Shanghai, or long-bustling metropolises such as Tokyo and Hong Kong, have become common settings for cinematic imaginings of crime, vice, deception, eroticism. (Shin & Gallagher, 2015, p. 5)

and, more importantly,

> East Asian noir repeatedly represents modernity's casualties, telling stories of the disenfranchised and marginal. This power dynamic does take us back to the social injustice of classical noir, even as it urges us to acknowledge the regionally specific conflicts and social formations that contribute to an expanded global-noir discourse. (Ibid. p. 6)

This is the connecting line between the four very different cultural contexts of Australia, Japan, Vietnam, and Hong Kong: an unease with modernity; with the capacity of economic and technological progress to dehumanise and alienate, and be a vehicle for the empowerment of the elite at the expense of the poor and the marginalised. In Hong Kong film and literature, noir has been used to critique the growing influence of a powerful China, while in Japan, it has explored how the introduction of savage capitalism has undermined traditional culture, and waves of top-down technological change have threatened individual identity. In Vietnam, noir discourse reveals the extent to which colonialism and modern warfare have traumatised the psyche of a generation, and in Australia, it tells the stories of the excluded: the working class and the Indigenous population.

The choice of these four countries – and this expanded definition of noir – is not simply about venturing into underexplored academic territory, but also a question of ethics. As Jen Webb argues in her discussion of Fredric Jameson:

> Fredric Jameson describes the 'triumph of Hollywood film' as an ethical failure because it stifles experiment and presents only certain ways of living and being as valued. He writes, 'if we can imagine nothing else, then obviously we have nothing to warn other cultures about either'. (Webb, 2015, p. 57)

While modernity, like noir, is a contested term, for the purposes of this essay it is defined as industrialization, urbanization, secularization, scientific and bureaucratic rationalization, capitalism, and the rise of the nation-state (Birch, Schirato, & Srivastava, 2001; Goscha, 2016, p. xxxiv). It means scientific reason, modern medicine, and a belief in progress, be it social, scientific, or technological.

Modernity means the questioning or rejection of traditional culture, and the tendency to prioritise the individual (Martinez, 2015). It means industrialised warfare, climate change, and mass surveillance (Miyao, 2015). Modernity means a spectacle of ceaseless change, of existential anxiety, of a world seemingly no longer moored in a fixed place (Fay & Nieland, 2009; Harootunian, 2002; Naremore, 2008; Park, 2015; Shin, 2015).

It is in the context of the ceaseless change of modernity – and of those disenfranchised by it – that the archetypes of Samurai, Gunslinger, Private Eye and Android appear over and again in new stories across different cultures, and in new versions of established stories. Both film noir and literature are used in this essay, as the narrative constructs, developments, and tropes apply equally, and my definition encompasses both forms. The filmic examples used here were chosen because they are widely known and therefore easily accessible, and also because they are either in English or are subtitled, thus making the transnational examples more readily available to Anglophone readers.

The philosophical connections across transnational noir are best exemplified via an unexpected object: the Spaghetti Western.

Fistful of Dollars, Red Harvest, Yojimbo

The American Western was revitalised by an Italian director inspired by a Japanese filmmaker with a love of hardboiled fiction. This is the curious international pedigree of the ground-breaking film *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Sergio Leone, a man who neither spoke English nor had visited the United States, redefined a quintessentially American setting (Frayling, 2006). Leoni based the plot of *Dollars* on Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*: the story of a masterless samurai who finds himself in a town torn between two gangs vying for control, which in turn was inspired by Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest* (Frayling, 2006). Kurosawa acknowledges Hammett's novel *The Glass Key* as an inspiration for *Yojimbo*. In particular, the torture scene is taken from the 1942 film version (which Leoni then copies for *Dollars*). Overwhelmingly, though, it is the plot of *Red Harvest* that Kurosawa draws.

In *Red Harvest*, the nameless Continental Op arrives in a town called Personville (nicknamed 'Poisonville' by everyone who's been there) and finds himself in the middle of a four-way tussle for control by various criminal elements. The Op proceeds – using calculated, merciless, and wilfully violent methods – to set the four factions against each other. He starts a war, and does not stop until nearly every criminal is dead, and parts of the town razed to the ground.

This is essentially the plot of *Yojimbo* and *Dollars*. Indeed, *A Fistful of Dollars* copies many of the scenes and even dialogue directly from *Yojimbo*. It was so close, in fact, that Kurosawa sued Leoni. They eventually came to terms – Kurosawa received the Japanese distribution rights to *Dollars* plus 15% of international sales (Gelten, 2013). All three texts were ultraviolent for their time, and in all three the protagonist chooses violence as the means to shake up the corrupt order. That the violence spirals out of control, killing many, including minor criminals and the family of criminals, seems to be of little importance to them.

Beyond the more obvious similarities of appearance, dialogue, and plot, is this: all three stories were a reaction against a radically changing political and economic climate. Kurosawa said of *Yojimbo* that he specifically wanted to critique modernity, in particular capitalism and new technologies (Martinez, 2015). *Yojimbo*, released in 1961, came at a time when Japan was struggling with the changes wrought in the country since the end of the disastrous Second World War. The occupation by and later alliance with the United States changed the cultural tenor of the nation, bringing about the rejection of old values and social structures (Miyao, 2015). In discussing Kurosawa's 'noir quartet' (*Stray Dog* [1949], *The Bad Sleep Well* [1960], *Yojimbo* [1961], and *High and Low* [1963]), Dolores Martinez argues the US and Japanese film industries:

> shared important roots that led to the development of the noir form: an anomie growing out of pre-war economic depression; an engagement with German Expressionism; and the traumatic experience of war, a form of suffering frequent in the representation of the hard-boiled hero. (Martinez, 2015, p. 38)

Martinez further argues, "in transporting Red Harvest's plot to the past, he [Kurosawa] was able to explore all the contradictions embodied within a noir protagonist,…all the while critiquing the rise of modern political corruption and capitalist culture" (Martinez, 2015, p. 48). *Red Harvest* was, for James Ellroy: "a coda to the Boom and a prophecy of the Depression. The Op witnesses and largely precipitates a hallucinogenic bloodbath in a Montana mining town. He pits labor against management and cops against crooks" (Ellroy, 2007, p. xii). Dashiell Hammett, in other words, was writing directly about the economic and social conditions of the day.

In further linking the archetypes of Gunslinger and Private Eye, Sue Matheson writes that the Western can constitute "the perfect locale in which to house the types of characters and narrative found in noir films, stories that reflect post-war disillusionment, constructed around

leitmotifs of violation, betrayal and social breakdown" (Matheson, 2005, p. 891). She argues that, like the hardboiled detective, the gunslinger "is an antisocial loner who functions in a world peopled with sociopaths in a Hobbesian wilderness where life is generally nasty, brutish, and short" (Ibid.).

By the 1960s, as the national confidence of 1950s USA began to erode, so Westerns changed tone, portraying a brutal and violent existence. Of *A Fistful of Dollars*, Leoni explained that the Western, up until that point, tended to see the problems of the West from a "Christian point of view", in which the main characters look forward to an optimistic, hopeful future, whereas: "I see the history of the West as really the reign of violence by violence" (Frayling, 2006, p. 135). In line with Leoni's vision, Matheson argues that Westerns, in particular many starring John Wayne during the 1960s, "offered a critique of capitalism and questioned the treatment of Indians as savages. White settlers are portrayed as predators and social misfits, Native Americans as the dispossessed" (Matheson, 2005, p. 906), and in discussing the subset of noirish gunslingers Sue Matheson argues they are: "destabilized, alienated figures, socially marginalized men caught in double binds – in short, the modern existential hero" (Matheson, 2005, p. 897).

Noir, in both its Eastern and Western cultural manifestations, expresses a philosophical unease with modernity; with the alienation caused by capitalism or technology; with society slowly shedding itself of long-held belief systems; with a new class and new mentality coming to rule. The *Yojimbo – Fistful of Dollars – Red Harvest* set of similarities are just one example of this East–West cross-fertilization of imagery, plot, and theme.

Further examples are to be found in cyberpunk, an extension of the noir form into the future, whose roots are yet firmly in the hardboiled fiction and film noir aesthetics of the past. I will turn now to the ground-breaking cyberpunk duet*, Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*, in

order to explore the evolution of noir in response to the changing conditions of late modernity.

Blade Runner and Ghost in the Shell

> *Cyberpunk blends the evocation of extravagant historical possibilities with the most hard-bitten and unillusioned of narrative styles, borrowed from the historical forms of the detective story and the film noir, which choke off the exhilaration of futurity.*
>
> Dan North – Ghost in the Shell: The Noir Instinct

The literary lineage of noir through to cyberpunk is clear. The twin foundational events of cyberpunk, *Blade Runner* (1982) in film, and *Neuromancer* (1984) in literature, have explicit links to hardboiled fiction, with both Ridley Scott and William Gibson citing Chandler and Hammett as key influences (Bowes, 2011; Morgan, 2017; Poole, 2003). In addition, *Blade Runner* was based on Philip K Dick's 1972 novella *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Though prefiguring the cyberpunk movement – Philip K Dick died in 1982 – his work is considered proto-cyberpunk, in its depiction of social decay, use of artificial intelligence, surveillance paranoia, and questioning of technological progress and the way it threatens the human condition (Eiss, 2014). William Gibson's novel is widely considered to have initiated the cyberpunk movement (K. Anderson, 2017), while *Blade Runner* provided the aesthetic template for a generation of science fiction film-makers (Spicer, 2010).

Like the Private Eye, Samurai and Gunslinger, Rick Deckard as a 'blade runner' exists somewhere between the law and the underworld. He is not a police officer, but rather an instrument of the police, a state-sanctioned hitman used to kill (or 'retire') wayward androids ('replicants'). Initially, Deckard is unwilling to do the work – he is forced to at the beginning of the film, with the police chief yelling as he tries to walk away: "You know the score, pal. You're not a cop, you're little people!" – yet when he does take the work, he is the best at what he does: retiring Replicants.

Replicants are slaves created by Tyrell, a mega-corporation that specialises in building androids to undertake the most dangerous tasks required for colonisation – that is, capitalist expansion beyond the terrestrial sphere. Tyrell also produces 'entertainment' model Replicants that provide sexual services to the spacefaring human communities. The motto of Tyrell Corporation is 'more human than human', and its mission is to create ever-more realistic models, to the point where they are indistinguishable from human beings. Replicants have a life span of four years, a safety mechanism to ensure they do not develop consciousness. This mechanism has clearly failed: a small group of these Replicants have returned to Earth to track down the head of Tyrell Corporation (Eldon Tyrell), to try to force him to extend their lifespans.

These rebel Replicants grasp at memory as a token of their existence – hoarding photographs, for example, as a way to build a past, instinctually reaching for that indefinable characteristic that nonetheless defines the sentient individual: a lifetime of memories. Tyrell Corporation understands this as well, taking this idea a step further with one (or perhaps two) of its newest Replicants. Later in the film, it is revealed that Rachel, Eldon Tyrell's personal assistant, is a Replicant *without knowing*. She has been given a lifetime of false memories and genuinely believes she is human. The rebel Replicants believe furiously, desperately, in their own existence, and so the horrifying ethical implications of what have been done to these beings, as commodities, slowly dawns. As Replicant leader Roy Batty says to Deckard, after terrorising and chasing him through an abandoned building: "*Quite an experience to live in fear isn't it? That's what it's like to be a slave*."

Roy Batty confronts Eldon Tyrell towards the end of the film:

> **Roy**: *It's not an easy thing to meet your maker.*
>
> …

Tyrell: *…You were made as well as we could make you.*

Roy: *But not to last*.

Tyrell: *The light that burns twice as brightly burns half as long, and you have burned so very very brightly, Roy. Look at you – you're the prodigal son. You're quite a prize*.

Roy: *I've done…questionable things*.

Tyrell: *Also extraordinary things. Revel in your time!*

Roy: *Nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn't let you in heaven for*.

Then, in an ultra-violent moment, Roy kisses Tyrell and gouges out his maker's eyes.

Blade Runner makes much of the human eye. The movie starts with the shot of an expansive, tech-noir cityscape, reflected in a human eye. Replicants have a red-disc reflection in their irises at certain angles, and the Voight-Kampff machine used by blade runners detects Replicants via the response of subject's retina to specific questions. The eyes are the window to the soul, it is said, and the Voight-Kampff machines test for souls. At every turn – technologically, philosophically, symbolically – *Blade Runner* asks the eternal philosophical question: what is human?

This question of memory as examined by *Blade Runner* is a recurring theme throughout noir and its descendants. The relationship between identity and amnesia is a trope in classic film noir, such as Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), and *The Crooked Way* (1949), and in literature, such as *The Black Curtain* (1941), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959). The neo-noir masterpiece *Memento* (2000), directed by Christopher Nolan, explores the mind of the amnesiac protagonist, Leonard Shelby, by structuring the film so each scene is a step further back in time. *Memento* and these earlier noirs explore the fallibility of memory, the mutability of character, the alienation of the self from the self. The Hong Kong film *Infernal*

Affairs (2002) interrogates memory in a different way. It explores the loss of *collective* memory, and the impact this has on the individual who is forgotten (Wing-Sang, 2006).

A further complication in *Blade Runner* is that Deckard *is himself* a Replicant, and therefore also exists in the demimonde between human and non- (or post-) human. He has been programmed with false memories, and, like Rachel, lacks this self-awareness. Deckard appears throughout the film to be a fully formed, if flawed human being, but in actuality possesses none of the rights of a human. He is the product of a corporation, a slave, living in complete alienation from the self, alienated by the forces of capital, commodification, and the relentless expansionism of the market. *Blade Runner*, therefore, picks up another recurring theme established in the earliest noir: the alienation and dehumanisation caused by capitalism and technology.

Aesthetically *Blade Runner* is also firmly within the classic noir discourse: the entire film is shot at night, in the rain. Ridley Scott drew inspiration from hardboiled fiction, in particular Raymond Chandler (Morgan, 2017; Tunzelmann, 2014), giving Deckard the private detective's long coat, drinking problem, and cynical detachment. Scott was also inspired by the then future-noir cityscape of Hong Kong (where Gibson likewise was inspired by Japan) (K. Anderson, 2017).

In turn, the director of seminal Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), Mamoru Oshii, said he "had no choice" but be influenced by the aesthetics and mood of *Blade Runner*, as it is "probably the foundation of movies" that deal with the android / human question (Rucka, 2004). *Ghost in the Shell* asks the same existential questions posed by *Blade Runner*: like Rick Deckard, the protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi walks the (ever fading) line between human and android. In 2029, the world is interconnected by a vast network, integrated into every aspect of human society. Most individuals have some form of cybernetic implant; some

even have full cybernetic bodies (or shells). As a public security officer in 'Section 9', the Major is tasked with policing the legal division between human and android – with those who would weaponize the blurring lines between human and android for unscrupulous ends. Yet the Major transgresses that line herself.

The Major speculates throughout the film on the nature of her reality, and the role of memory in forming identity. While someone who takes full-body prosthesis is still considered human (as they have a ghost), the Major begins to doubt whether she was once human. She has some human brain cells left, but the more she works with victims who have been 'ghost hacked' – memories wiped or changed – the more she believes she may have been hacked as well, and that everything she believes is a lie. More, she also wonders *if it even matters* if the provenance of memories is not in the organic:

> **Batou:** *It sounds to me like you're doubting your own ghost.*
> **Major:** *What if a cyber-brain could possibly generate its own ghost, create a soul all by itself? And if it did, just what would be the importance of being human then?*

At the end of *Ghost in the Shell*, the major 'dives into' the consciousness of her main antagonist, The Puppet Master. The Puppet Master is a 'ghost' without a 'shell'. He emerged as a spontaneous consciousness from the net, and was neither created by human programming nor was once human. He downloaded himself into a cyborg body, so he could claim political asylum, but in doing so has opened himself up to the possibility of death. While the Puppet Master considers himself to be a lifeform, he is unable to procreate and produce offspring, as a lifeform does. Thus, he asks the Major to let him merge his 'ghost' (or memories) with hers, and form a new, non-corporeal, third individual:

> **Puppet Master:** *…We have been subordinate to our limitations until now. The time has come to cast aside these bonds and to elevate our consciousness to a higher plane. It is time to become a part of all things.*

They merge.

At the finale of *Blade Runner*, after saving Rick Deckard from certain death, Roy Batty gives the best-known monologue in the history of cyberpunk:

> **Roy:** *I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tenhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.*
>
> *Time to die*.

Roy dies, and the dove he is holding flutters into the sky. *Blade Runner* states it clearly: there *is* a ghost in the shell.

Where *Red Harvest* set the template for the hardboiled detective – one who hunts the law breakers yet is also a law breaker – *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* are the touchstone cyberpunk discourses on machines transgressing the line into humanity. The first transgresses moral codes and social mores, the second violates the codification of the human. And yet, while the detective and the android have transgressive tendencies, they both serve the dominant economic, technological and political structures.

Existentialism and Modernity

Beyond the narrative and philosophical preoccupations of *Fistful of Dollars*, *Yojimbo*, *Red Harvest*, *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*, a far more pertinent question arises: how can five stories told across three different countries, six decades apart, be compelling for audiences from such fundamentally different cultural and temporal contexts?

These stories have a shared philosophical core, one that goes to the heart of modern civilisation: an unease that binds noir and cyberpunk across time and culture. The Private Eye, the masterless Samurai, the Gunslinger, and the Android: each the loner who works to their own, often opaque, code; who exists somewhere between the demimonde of the criminal underworld and 'civilised' society (or between human and post-human). The four archetypes of Android, Gunslinger, Detective and Samurai closely resemble the 'existential' individual as articulated by French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and others in the late 1930s and early forties. This is no coincidence. Hardboiled literature proved to be an inspiration for the most important thinkers in the field of existentialism.

Hammett wrote *Red Harvest* in 1927 and his last published novel, *The Thin Man* in 1934; Sartre published his debut novel, *Nausea,* in 1938, and his non-fiction opus, *Being and Nothingness*, in 1943. Camus published his first novel, *The Stranger* in 1942, and in writing the novel was directly influenced by 1930s hardboiled writers Horace McCoy and James M Cain (Schrader, 1972). The term 'existentialism' was not coined until the mid-1940s by philosopher Gabriel Marcel (Cooper, 1999), at around the same time 'film noir' was first defined by French film critics.

Jean-Paul Sartre believed hardboiled literature offered the only way to write about the atrocities of his time, "including the civil war in Spain, the concentration camps, the refugee

crisis, and World War II" (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. 30). Sartre argued existentialist literature was a premeditated, cerebral version of the underlying philosophy of hardboiled literature: "We have treated consciously and intellectually what was the fruit of a talented and unconscious spontaneity" (Ibid.). Fay and Nieland also note the clear lineage extending from the hardboiled, to the existential, to the noir:

> Since many of the authors Sartre celebrated wrote the novels and short stories on which 1940s films noir were based (Faulkner, Cain, and Dashiell Hammett), it is little wonder that French film critics, conversant in existentialism, would be similarly attracted to noir's criminal irrationality, primitive violence, and ecstatic realism. (Fay & Nieland, 2009)

Existentialist philosophy argues that existence precedes essence: an individual need not be determined by the arbitrary and absurd rules of the world they are born into and, on realising this, can exercise their freedom according to their own codes and values (Cooper, 1999). The core of existentialist philosophy can be summarised as follows: life is meaningless; only an individual acting authentically can give it meaning. The absurdity (or thoroughgoing corruption) of the world cannot be changed, but it need not be accepted, either. This sense of the absurd, the revelation that there is no order or meaning in the universe, expresses itself in the alienation that emerges as a corollary to this knowledge.

This essay also uses the Marxian definition of alienation (while acknowledging the influence of Marxism on existentialism): the ways in which technology and capital alienate the individual from the product of their labour, and through this, their individuality; and the manner in which capital alienates the marginalised from others of their class. Nieland and Fay discuss this in relation to the character of 'the Swede' in early noir film *The Killers* (1946), where he is faced with the inadequacy of his worldview in the new capitalist world,

"its fragmented social forms, its alienated labor, its egoism, its estranged city life" (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. 138).

The rise of hardboiled literature, then existentialism, and finally film noir in overlapping succession during the inter-war period was no accident. This is a world that saw the aftermath of the Great War, the depths of the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the key Enlightenment ideals – learning, civilisation, and progress – shaken to their very core. The elegant and spare writing of Dashiell Hammett in the 1930s explored the moral vacuum of an era: the crony capitalism of inter-war America, the unchecked power of business and political elites and their collusion in perpetuating a corrupt system, the crushing underfoot of the dreams of regular people (Ellroy, 2007).

Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argue the 'metaphysical detective story' is defined by the protagonist being forced into "confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity" (Merivale & Sweeney, 1998, p. 2). It is worth noting here that *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* could, via this definition, be classified as metaphysical detective stories. Hammett's fiction has not generally been known as 'metaphysical'; however, into all his major novels the hardboiled author added existential interludes – seeming non-sequiturs – that take on metaphysical overtones. In *The Maltese Falcon* for example, Sam Spade, apropos of nothing, relates to a friend the story of an old case: a woman who had him track down her husband, who'd suddenly disappeared a few years before. "He went like that," Spade says, "like a fist when you open your hand" (Hammett, 2005, p. 61). When Spade finds the man (Flitcraft) living in another city, Flitcraft explains the reason he suddenly left his family. Flitcraft was walking back to work after lunch when a beam fell down from a construction site above and narrowly missed him. Spade says, "he felt like somebody had taken the lid off his life and let him look at the works" (Ibid.).

Flitcraft, in trying to order his life in the way expected by society, became out-of-step with reality, with the arbitrariness and randomness of life.

After the incident, Flitcraft wandered the country for years, until he settled down and married again, with a wife, Spade says, 'more alike than different' from his first wife, and returned to the same routine he'd had before. Spade ends the tale by saying: "that's the part of it I always like. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to their not falling" (Hammett, 2005, p. 62). This lengthy tale, dropped into the text, is not standard pulp fiction fare. Steven Marcus argues that these contradictions – between individuals trying to behave in a rational, sensible, and responsible way, even when they know full well that the world is irrational, arbitrary, and corrupt – express the broader metaphysical contradictions in Hammett's work (Marcus, 1992, p. xvii).

Given this context, hard-boiled literature is not necessarily the 'unconscious spontaneity' Sartre attributed to certain crime writers in the 1920s, but rather – particularly in the case of Hammett – a conscious, philosophical response to the economic and social conditions of an era. Sue Matheson argues, referencing Robert Porfirio's *No Way Out: Existential Motifs in Film Noir*:

> The existential bias in American noir films, most likely drawn from the hardboiled school of American fiction, is best viewed as 'an attitude characteristic of the modern spirit…an outlook that places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates'. (Matheson, 2005, p. 895)

Hammett did not have some codified notion of existentialism in mind, given the movement was only named as such in the mid-1940s. Rather, it was his response to an era that he viewed as 'brutally acquisitive' (Marcus, 1992), where, through his personal experiences as a detective for the Pinkerton agency, he knew respectable society to be just as corrupt and

mendacious as the organised crime gangs. He knew moral ambiguity too, required as he was to represent the interests of capital in a time when the Pinkertons were known for thuggish union-busting (Ellroy, 2007).

Dashiell Hammett's labour as a detective – a vocation he cherished – was ultimately nothing more than an instrument of capital. He was alienated from his labour in the Marxian sense, but also existentially alienated from the society he operated within. Hammett saw the Hobbesian nature of the streets, where the inherent nature of 'man' was base, fearful, and violent (Hobbes, 1998). This Hobbesian nature of society extended, as well, to the state as Leviathan. Its many-tentacled reach, the crushing weight of its power in order to maintain the status quo. According to Ellroy, Hammett observed "how crime seamlessly pervades the body politics and defines a whole culture" (Ellroy, 2007, p. x). Hammett, in his personal and professional life, stood at the juncture of capital and labour, modernity and tradition, a dispossessed underclass and a corrupt elite, and poured this knowledge into his work, creating the hardboiled genre.

Hammett left his career as a private eye scarred by what he had seen. He became politically active, a communist, and an author. He was blacklisted by the Committee of un-American Activities and served jail time for his political beliefs. He drank and smoked heavily, suffered from debilitating bouts of tuberculosis, and died living the life of a hermit. Like his characters, Hammett was a self-destructive anti-hero who tried to live his life by a code. Himself a hardboiled archetype, the philosophical concerns he identified in his writing remain the concerns of the Gunslinger, The Detective, the Samurai and the Android. Hammett didn't invent scepticism towards modernity, or the alienation caused by capital and technology, or the absurdities placed on the individual in a corrupt and rapidly changing

world. He did, however, create a narrative template that has proven to be a useful instrument for expressing the same concerns across cultures and time.

Conclusion

Max Weber wrote: “the decisive means for politics is violence” (Weber, 1918 / 2015). And this is also the decisive means within noir: the triumph of violence. Not the violence, either, of the Samurai, the Private Eye, the Gunslinger, or the Android. They are merely instruments. The true violence is inherent to the social order; violence as a logical endpoint in the reification of Hobbesian capitalist accumulation, torn free of the restraints of social mores or tradition.

The transnational experience of modernity has both local and universal expressions in art. What links the *global* experience of US, Australia, Europe, East and Southeast Asia is rapid development, cultural loss, the alienating forces of economic capital, and the indifferent and corrupt rule of the Leviathan state. The Gunslinger, the Private Eye, the Samurai and the Gunslinger are modernity’s antagonists. They live at the margins of the law, of frontiers, and even what it means to be human. They walk the Earth amongst modernity’s casualties. The narrative template of noir, with its origins in the hardboiled and disillusioning interwar period, offers a mood, tone, and critique of power that resonates across culture and time.

Chapter Two – Framing the Field

Art adds cultural flesh to history's analytic bones

Milton Osborne – Southeast Asia: An Introductory History

Science Fiction

This doctorate is not merely about the historical impact of modernity across cultures over several decades; it is also about the future. It is here the literature of speculation – science fiction – vividly paints a picture of where we may be headed. By 'science fiction' I mean possible futures wherein the political, cultural, and scientific world-building has been extrapolated from the present day. In the words of Miriam Allen De Ford: "Science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities" (Ford, 1971).

This essay also deals, therefore, with future history: the nearly thirty years from the present day until 2046. These future histories include Japan's *Ghost in the Shell*, set in 2029; Australia's *The Rover*, set ten years after 'global economic collapse'; and the seminal Hong Kong film *2046*. As Ursula le Guin has argued, science fiction is *descriptive*, not predictive (LeGuin, 2010); science fiction takes the DNA strands of the future that exist already in the present. Whether environmental collapse in Australia, or challenging the very notion of what it means to be human in Japan, these are events that *are happening in these countries today*.

These sentiments were echoed by the father of cyberpunk, William Gibson, when he famously said: “the future is already here – it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

Jen Webb argues for the utility of the science-fictional approach in *Researching Creative Writing*: “In literary works we can imagine our current environment and possible futures and write about them in a way that challenges or critiques contemporary mores” (Webb, 2015, p. 57). This doctorate, in the words of Miriam Allen de Ford, deals with ‘improbable possibilities’. I am concerned with geopolitics, modernity, and the social responses to rapid economic and technological change: subjects that can be examined – and better understood – by studying a selection of cultural responses across Asia over a century of film and literature. I also explore these themes through my science-fiction noir novel, produced for this doctorate, titled *Thirty-Six Streets*.

Science fiction in this essay does not mean flying cars, and the failure of the world today to have flying cars is not a failure of the movie *Blade Runner* in imagining them in 1982. Rather, science fiction is the revelatory power of a film like *Blade Runner*, of it being able to capture a mood, tone, and aesthetic that feels contemporary more than thirty years later. *Blade Runner* described a future history of urban decay, multiculturalism, corporate greed and corruption, boundless commodification and existential alienation, and was unerringly *right* on all counts.

Research Design

The design of this PhD is multidisciplinary, incorporating creative practice, textual analysis, critical theory, and cultural studies. The research draws on academic texts, primary source material of related film and literature, and interviews with academics and artists from Southeast and East Asia. The interviews took place during literary festivals in Hong Kong and Singapore, and in one case a field trip to Hanoi.

My creative product is, as Christopher Frayling defines it, *research through art* (Frayling, 1993/94, p. 5). Jen Webb expands on Frayling's idea as follows:

> This involves the writer-researcher in a process of making pieces of creative writing, and reflecting consciously on an element of technical expertise…the knowledge gained in such a project can be drawn on by other creative writers, to develop their understanding of how to make a literary artefact, how to handle – say – a generic form. (Webb, 2015, pp. 13 - 14)

The essay component does not reflect specifically on my creative product; rather, the novel, *Thirty-Six Streets,* very much draws inspiration from the creative output of artists working in the noir form. While *Thirty-Six Streets* absorbs the tropes and themes harking all the way back to classic noir period, it is also firmly placed in the present, in the particular national imaginings of Vietnamese and Australian noir.

Creative Product – *Thirty-Six Streets*

My creative product is a science-fiction noir manuscript that aims to realise some of the themes relevant to transnational noir in general, and Vietnam in particular. The novel is focalised through Lin 'The Silent One' Vu, a gangster and sometime private investigator. Born in Vietnam, raised in Australia, everywhere an outsider; she lives in Chinese-occupied Hanoi, in the steaming, paranoid alleyways of the Old Quarter – known as the Thirty-Six Streets.

I chose Hanoi as the setting, in part, because I had lived there for three years (2013 – 2016) just prior to starting this doctorate. Living abroad dumps a truckload of grist into the writer's creative mill, and this was certainly true for Vietnam. East Asia has, obviously, been central to the seminal science fiction noir texts of *Neuromancer* and *Blade Runner*, fusing their near-future visions with the techno, teaming, sometimes squalid city-life of places like Hong Kong and Tokyo.

As a scholar of the region, and a former aid worker who spent close to a decade living in Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Burma, my interest, however, goes beyond the aesthetic and the exotic. An aid worker cannot help but come into contact with pervasive corruption, or avoid witnessing the worst of human suffering. It is a profession with high rates of PTSD. Noir as a sensibility is one to which a former aid worker might understandably be attracted.

Hanoi is, of course, a city I can only write about as an outsider, even after three years living in the Old Quarter. This is why it was necessary that the protagonist of *Thirty-Six Streets* also be an outsider (and noir necessitates this alienation in its anti-heroes, in any case). Nonetheless, I am in a position to observe that Hanoi is vibrant, frenetic, unapologetic city; a city always on the move, yet anchored in its rich culture. Five thousand years old, yet rapidly

changing as the future arrives; at the feet of its gleaming skyscrapers wait the street urchins in conical bamboo hats, selling fruit from the back of their bicycles. A city with an underbelly, with those of a mind to look: the dive bars, the labyrinthine back alleys; the blinking neon signs of the karaoke joint-cum-brothels; the Buddhist temples sprinkled in among a raucous and fevered nightlife. Hanoi is a noir metropolis with a ringside seat to the coming Chinese century.

The question is not why I'd set a science-fiction noir novel in Hanoi, but rather why no-one else has ever done it before.

Noir Limit Case: The Proto-Noir of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *The Robbers*

As I have proposed a new definition for transnational noir, I believe it is useful to test the limits of that definition. Noir is difficult to classify because it is not a genre, but rather a discourse marked by mood and theme. The following limit case explores the nuances of this classification.

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's novella *The Robbers* (1917) has many characteristics of a classic noir story. There is a femme fatale and a heist gone wrong. The characters participate in sexually transgressive behaviour and are in a state of psychological turmoil. It also contains elements which I have argued are key to transnational noir: the natural environment is extreme, and the twin protagonists are alienated. Yet, despite these multiple attributes linking the novella to noir, several others disqualify it from such a categorization. As such, *The Robbers* represents a salient example of the limit case for this essay's definition of transnational noir.

The Raiment of Noir

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa is one of Japan's most influential and respected writers (McVittie, 1964; H. Murakami, 2006). Born in 1892 during the Meiji restoration, he rose to prominence via his short stories, and was championed by Natsume Soseki, himself considered the foremost Japanese writer of any time (H. Murakami, 2006). Akutagawa struggled with his physical and mental health throughout his life, committing suicide at the age of thirty-five. He is known in the West primarily for two short stories: *In a Grove,* and *Rashomon* – which were both drawn on by Akira Kurosawa for his influential film *Rashomon* (1950). *The Robbers* is less well-known, even in Japan (the Japanese title is 'Chuto', which has also been translated as 'The Bandits'). The novella rarely appears in collections of his short stories. In

English, it is only available in *The Beautiful and the Grotesque* (1964). Akutagawa disliked the story, considering it a failure (F. Murakami, 1996, p. 36).

It is fortunate that *The Robbers* does exist in translation, as it presents a remarkable example of a seemingly proto-noir story, preceding the hardboiled era by a decade. The novella is set during the Heian period, circa 1000 CE. John McVitties argues:

> In the era in which 'the robbers' of Akutagawa's story were active in the capital of Japan, there was no subtlety attached to the possession of power, and there was constant battle for it between rival clans and between honest warriors and rascals – *the distinction between an honest man and a rascal not always clear* [emphasis added] (McVittie, 1964, p. 25).

This blurring of lines between the 'good' and 'bad' individual is another point in common with the typical noirish milieu. The morally conflicted individuals in question in *The Robbers* are two brothers – Jiro and Taro. The first is young and handsome, the second is older, scarred by smallpox, and missing an eye. Both are masterless samurai – one of the key archetypes of transnational noir. Jiro and Taro are both in love (or, at least lust), with the same woman, Shakin. This love triangle is the core conflict of the novella.

Shakin cuts a remarkable literary figure, given the era: she is young, beautiful, seductive, and the leader of a band of robbers. Shakin was Taro's lover, but has replaced him for this younger brother Jiro. She also sleeps with her step-father – an overweight, cowardly man – apparently with the approval of her mother. Shakin unashamedly uses sex and her sexuality to control those around her. And it works. She is the undisputed leader of the band.

Shakin uses her authority to ruthlessly lead the robbers into a trap. First, she orchestrates a plan to rob a local official, Judge To. Then she proceeds to tell a samurai working for To when the heist is going to occur, so they may set up an ambush, and nominates Taro as the

one to lead the attack and to steal Judge To's prize horse. Shakin explains all of this to the young Jiro, rationalising that Taro will be killed, and therefore she and Jiro may be lovers, openly, without fear of retribution from the fearsome older brother.

So far, the plot appears to emulate a characteristic noir set-up. The atmosphere of the novella, too, is oppressive. It opens with Taro walking down a street in the decaying former capital of Kyoto:

> The breathless sky, hung with humid summer heat, spread over the houses; it was a certain noon in July. At the crossroads where the man had paused there was a willow - the leaves on its sparse branches so long and slender that one might think it suffered from the plague prevailing at that time; it cast its meagre shadow over the ground; and at this place there was no wind to stir the leaves withering in the sun…Everywhere fiery dust bathed the crossroads…there was not one drop of moisture. (Akutagawa, 1917/1964)

This oppressive atmosphere permeates the narrative, reflecting the psychological torment experienced by the brothers.

Towards the end of the novella, after the ambush, many of the criminal band are either dead or on the run. Jiro manages to fight off two samurai, but as he flees he is attacked by a pack of wild dogs. His brother Taro, having avoided death and now riding the stolen horse, sees Jiro in desperate trouble, but rides on. Taro knows that if his brother dies, Shakin will be his. A noirish, brutal denouement seems inevitable.

Until Taro has a change of heart, returns, and saves his brother. Later, they confront Shakin and kill her. They live happily ever after, as loyal, honourable samurai working for the elite. This ending is particularly un-noirish, and places the preceding story in a different light. The idea, first and foremost, that there is such a thing as the right side of the law, that serving it is

honourable, and that redemption resides in serving the elite, is contrary to the key thematic concerns of noir outlined in this essay. The ending, according to its translator and editor John McVittie, has the following meaning:

> 'The Robbers' has a satisfying denouement in that two characters in whom our interest is aroused, though utterly confused by the intrigue around them, were able, either from conscience or instinct, to "rectify their hearts". (McVittie, 1964, p. 24)

McVittie is referring here to the Confucian notion whereby before one can spread virtue and promote a well-ordered society, one must first rectify one's own heart. Noir looks upon such ideals as quaint and naïve: hearts are not rectified, merely broken.

The brothers Jiro and Taro are not up against the corruption of the system. Corruption, rather, comes in the form of the femme fatale, Shakin. She is not representative here, as in classic noir, of the broader changes of modernity within society, or the related anxieties of men in general, or of women trying to subvert traditional gender roles (Grossman, 2007). The femme fatale in *The Robbers* simply represents the corrupting impact of lust. While lust and transgressive sexual behaviour – almost always initiated by the femme fatale – are frequently depicted in classic films noir and hardboiled fiction, this is connected to the changing role of women in post-war America, and the corresponding projection of male anxieties. In the case of Shakin, though, it is the corruption of lust set against the 'virtuous' filial love of the brothers Taro and Jiro (F. Murakami, 1996, pp. 36 - 37). The cold and calculating nature of Shakin's sexuality contrasts sharply with that of the other key female character, a pregnant servant named Akogi. She is mentally disabled, and Akutagawa makes much of the 'innocence' that comes from her ignorance. She is exploited ruthlessly by the men and women around her, but never herself becomes cruel. Akogi gives birth towards the end of the novella which, for scholar of Japanese literature Fuminobu Murakami, represents the "maternal salvation which purifies evil" (F. Murakami, 1996, p. 37).

Akutagawa and *Ko-kon-to-zai nit su-jiru*

Japan, in the historical context of Akutagawa's writing, was in a period of "social and political upheaval of extraordinary profundity", where the "[f]eudal system was dismantled, the samurai disarmed, and a process of rapid industrialization set in motion" (Pilling, 2014, p. 66). The modernising period of the Meiji restoration began in 1868, opening the country up and looking to the West for its technological advancements. However, this had only been in place for a generation by the time Akutagawa began his writing career in 1914. Thus, while the urban centres of Japan were undergoing rapid change, outside of the cities much of the country was still deeply immersed in a pre-modern culture (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xxvii). Therefore, as the member of an educated, urban elite, Akutagawa found himself at an historical juncture of the premodern and modern, of East and West.

Like Dashiell Hammett, this places Ryūnosuke Akutagawa in an historical moment where his work could have become anti-hegemonic, a truly proto-noir manifestation of unease at the revolutionary changes in Japanese society and culture. This did not happen. While Akutagawa was deeply interested in the influence of Western ideas, and the clash of the pre-modern world and the modernising Meiji period (beginning in 1868), he was not, in *The Robbers*, critiquing the erosion of the former by the latter. He was not writing about the ceaseless change of modernity, and certainly not about those most likely to be the casualties of modernity – the poor and the marginalised. As Murakami argues, he "was far too sceptical, far too individualistic, and far too intelligent ever to believe that he could become an effective intellectual spokesman for the working class" (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xxx).

Akutagawa was *ko-kon-to-zai nit su-jiru,* or 'conversant with the old-new-east-west'; he was a cultured Japanese of the first rank, and could switch easily between worlds (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xxix). Akutagawa immersed himself in the intersection of Eastern and Western

cultures, pursuing both classic Chinese and Japanese texts, and modern western writers like Dostoyevsky. He was fascinated by Christianity, and when he committed suicide through an overdose of barbiturates, was found with a bible in his hands.

As Murakami writes:

> He [Akutagawa] wore Western suits, smoked cigars, drank coffee, ate beef, conversed now and then with foreigners, and appreciated opera. Such a Westernised lifestyle was, for him entirely comfortable (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xxvi).

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa became known as the quintessential writer of the liberal Taisho period (1912 – 1926) and his suicide in 1928 was widely seen as marking the defeat of Taisho Democracy as the forces of repression and imperialism moved towards the second world war. While Akutagawa was alive, Japan had solidified its position in the world order, liberal tendencies emerged, and people "sang the praises of modernism" (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xvii). Haruki Murakami goes on to argue:

> This liberal climate was thoroughly crushed by the 1929 stock market crash, the ensuing worldwide Depression, and the rise of militarism and fascism, *but all that happened after Akutagawa had left the world.* With him, we are still in the midst of Taisho democracy, liberalism, and modernism. [emphasis added] (H. Murakami, 2006, p. xxvii)

Akutagawa was not a critic of modernity, but rather a fascinated participant.

In conclusion, if Ryūnosuke Akutagawa was concerned about corruption, it was his own corruption, or – in the in the case of *The Robbers* – the corrupting influence of a woman, and the sin of lust against the virtue of filial love. Jiro and Taro are alienated, yes, but only from the law and each other, and only because of these lusts, not from the dehumanising characteristics of the wider milieu. The novella is a morality tale about getting right with the

law, in contradistinction to noir, which has no morality, other than the injunction to act authentically in the face of repression.

Where transnational noir involves ambiguities, open-ended narratives, and unanswerable questions, *The Robbers* has none of these things. It confirms the virtue of loyalty to one's brother, of motherly love, knowing one's place, and an obedience to the law. This is not to argue *The Robbers* is not a dark story; rape, murder, betrayal, and psychological torment are all immanent to the novella. But these traits are inherent in the characters, not the broader society. Corruption is within them, within the femme fatale, rather than representing a structural corruption. While *The Robbers* does tell the story of the marginalised – a group of criminals – there is no sympathy for them, no sense of ambiguity about their existence, no comparison of them as being just the same – or worse – than the legal authorities. As Haruki Murakami notes, Akutagawa is not one to put himself in the place of the criminals, to believe he can truly tell their story.

The Robbers is a compelling novella of lust and betrayal. It has noir characteristics but is not noir. The ambiguities in the heart of Jiro and Taro are resolved – cleansed – by the death of the seductress. This is not about modernity's casualties, but rather the casualties of a woman's vice. This is a redemption story.

Country Studies: Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam

The four country studies that follow elucidate and expand on the themes discussed in the introduction. These studies are, in some ways, a stepping off point from Stephen Teo's seminal 'Darker than Dark: Film Noir in its Asian Contexts', where he encourages future scholars to explore the "social, political, historical, cultural and nationalistic dimensions of film noir in its Asian contexts" (Teo, 2014, p. 141). However imperfect my execution, this is the starting point for these chapters.

There is a tension between the modern and the traditional that emerges in different ways in these four countries. I am reminded of an argument made by Birch, Schirato and Srivastava argue in *Asia: Cultural Politics in the Global Age*:

> Modernisation is usually understood as being about progress, about change, and breaking free from outdated traditions. And yet … states invariably use supposed "ancient" traditions, beliefs and values as the glue with which to bind different groups together as a nation. (Birch et al., 2001, p. 16)

These local traditions and histories emerge in the national noir discourses that follow. Yet, these national types also conform to the themes laid out in the transnational noir template, through the definition proposed in the introductory chapter.

I also note that while I have delineated a distinct local type of noir for the four countries – namely, Apocalypse Noir, Sunshine Noir, Identity Noir, and Android Noir – I am not claiming these to be the *only* local noir. In Japan, for example, while I focus on the idea of the android, and its relationship to fears about invasive technological change, there is also a strand of what has been called 'Feminist Noir' in Japan. A group of contemporary crime novels by female authors that take on – often in a very violent way – the patriarchal traditions of Japanese culture.

However, I would argue that the four traditions I have chosen are significant, and reflective of the domestic experience of modernity in these countries. In the case of Australia and Vietnam, I would further argue that the noir forms discussed are overwhelmingly the dominant noir discourses of those two countries.

Chapter Three – Hong Kong

Identity Noir: *The Art of Forgetting and Remembering*

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting

- Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

Introduction

Hong Kong noir is concerned with the nature of collective identity in the context of unrelenting geopolitical pressure. Once a British colony, now a 'special administrative region' in China, but never really part of either, Hong Kong identity has been forged under the pressure of great powers. Today, as China tightens its political grip on the city, and cherished freedoms – speech, artistic expression, association – that once made it distinct from the Mainland are disappearing, the Hong Kongese are increasingly seeking to imagine their common identity. While these freedoms are certainly a more recent invention – they were never synonymous with the history of British rule – this does not undermine the potency of such imaginings.

Hong Kong is unique insofar as it has an expiry date as a political entity. The time-bound nature of its existence gives impetus – even a desperation – to Hong Kong's search for

identity. Amnesia and the fragility of memory – common tropes of noir – therefore have a particular resonance in Hong Kong cinema. I will explore these ideas through two of the seminal works of Hong Kong films noir: *Infernal Affairs* and *2046*. These films, while superficially very different, nonetheless provide fruitful examples of the ways in which Hong Kong noir explores a fear of the future, a nostalgia for an imagined past, and the shifting sands of identity.

As has been argued elsewhere in this essay, noir is an anti-hegemonic form. Hong Kong, as a city that has felt the unyielding grasp of colonialism through different eras, is in many ways is the national embodiment of this artistic rebellion. While individual accounts of the past will differ, cinema is machine memory, and therefore a collective mode of imagining. This chapter explores how the medium of film has become a site of conflict between two very different imaginings of the past: the self-assured and didactic memory of the Mainland Chinese regime, and the far more nuanced and ambiguous remembering of Hong Kong cinema.

Two Colonialisms

Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire after China (during the Qing Dynasty, 1644 – 1912), ceded Hong Kong Island in 1842, at the end of the First Opium War. The colony was expanded to the Kowloon peninsula after the Second Opium War in 1860, and was further extended to the New Territories when Britain obtained a 99-year lease in 1898 (Bland, 2017). The whole was returned to China with much fanfare on 1 July 1997. China agreed (in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration) to maintain Hong Kong's political and economic systems for 50 years – to 2047 – under the 'one country, two systems' principle (Dapiran, 2017; Law, 2006).

Towards the end of British rule, and in direct response to the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, a Bill of Rights was promulgated by Hong Kong Legislative Council (Dapiran, 2017). The rights protected included freedom of opinion, expression, and association, as well as the right of peaceful assembly. Anthony Dapiran argues the legislation played a role in helping Hong Kong citizens "coalesce…around the development of a unique identity – which came to be referred to – in official government discourse, in the media and around tea house tables in Hong Kong – as 'Hong Kong Core Values'" (Dapiran, 2017, p. 25). Clearly, a fear of the future under Mainland Chinese rule was intrinsic to the codification of these values.

A contradiction stemming from these 'core values' is immediately obvious: while certain freedoms have been granted, the democratic franchise has not. This led to street protest, rather than the ballot box, as a means of venting popular discontent (Dapiran, 2017). Perhaps the three best-known demonstrations in Hong Kong history are the riots of 1967, the Tiananmen vigil (every year on June 4), and the 2014 Umbrella movement. These three are worth discussing briefly, if only to illustrate the two colonialisms faced by the people of Hong Kong, and the effect this has had on the social and political consciousness.

Law Wing-Sang argues: “There are historical moments in which Hong Kong is overwhelmed by Chinese nationalistic passions; there are also other periods when Hong Kong Chinese strongly refuse to be identified with the ‘mainlanders’” (Law, 2006, p. 386). A salient example of the former were the 1967 ‘leftist’ riots, a Maoist-led uprising against British colonial rule that coincided (and was inspired by) the Cultural Revolution in the Mainland (the film *2046* has these protests as a backdrop). After a crackdown on protestors by the Hong Kong police force, a terrorist bombing campaign was initiated by the leftists, resulting in the deaths of 51 people, most of whom were innocent bystanders.

Consistent with Law’s argument, a fundamental counter-example came twenty years later, when Hong Kong watched in horror as tanks rolled over the student protestors in Tiananmen Square. Spontaneous protests erupted in Hong Kong against the atrocities. Thousands of Mainland Chinese fled to Hong Kong, bringing with them stories of the bloody crackdown and its paranoid and oppressive aftermath (Lim, 2015). The vigil for the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square takes place every year on June 4 in Hong Kong – the only place in China where this occurs. Indeed, this is increasingly the only place it is even *remembered.* Tiananmen is now called euphemistically the ‘June 4th Incident’ in the Mainland, and has been expunged from textbooks and history books, with a total ban on representation in film or literature. Those who do try to remember – such as Chinese Nobel Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo – are silenced and imprisoned.

As Louisa Lim argues in her book on Tiananmen, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia* (2015), it is not just the Massacre that has been slotted into the memory hole, but *any* event that complicates the political narrative of the community regime: “Forgetting is a skill that older Chinese are practiced in, with the net of history stretched so wide that whole decades sometimes fall through the gaps” (Lim, 2015, p. 117). And, furthermore:

> The forgetting that has engulfed China is not just enforced from above; the people have learned to avert their eyes and minds from anything unpleasant, allowing their brains to be imprinted with false memories – or allowing memories to be erased – for the sake of convenience. (Lim, 2015, p. 211)

Whereas, she argues, "In Hong Kong, the right to memory is fiercely guarded" (Lim, 2015, p. 215). These different approaches to memory are important, as this tension emerges in Hong Kong cinema. Anxiety around memory is key to the plots of both *2046* (where a train travels from 1967 to the future of 2046 to retrieve lost memories), and *Infernal Affairs* (where an undercover cop has been forgotten by the rest of society). Memory is central to evoking the sense of loss and nostalgia in the former, and tragedy in the latter.

While the size of the June 4 vigil dwindled in the early years of the new millennium, in 2009 the numbers jumped to an estimated 100,000 – 150,000 people, and has remained around this size since (Dapiran, 2017). Several scholars have noted that the June 4 protests have morphed from a protest against the atrocities of 1989 to an expression of anxiety about Hong Kong's future (Dapiran, 2017; Nakama, 2009; Teo, 2005b). Law Wing-Sang argues:

> June 4th quickly transformed itself into an icon of Hong Kong popular memory, which the people of Hong Kong are, in many ways, obliged to forget so as to be in line with other Chinese living on the Mainland. Yet the years-long pressure to forget has turned that trauma into a defining characteristic of Hong Kong identity…In a sense, the localization of June 4th has evolved over the years, turning it into a Hong Kong home issue. (Law, 2006, p. 387)

The 'Umbrella Revolution' of 2014 was a massive protest movement that caught the attention of the world. The catalyst for the movement was a decision by Beijing to 'pre-screen' candidates for Chief Executive of Hong Kong, where previously there had been a promise to allow direct election via universal suffrage. The protests lasted three months, shutting down key roads and locations in the city. The Umbrella Movement showed persistence, discipline,

and courage. Yet Beijing remained intransigent. Where street protests in Hong Kong previously had a record of success, eventually the movement dissipated with none of its goals achieved. With one exception. There was and is a widespread belief that the Umbrella protests promoted a social awakening, "while solidifying a new collective identity among Hong Kongers" (Dapiran, 2017, p. 89).

Law Wing-Sang notes, somewhat wryly, that Hong Kongers are known to say, "Nothing much has changed" (Law, 2006, p. 383) when asked about the transition to Chinese rule. While the visitor may take this as meaning everything is fine, the message, rather, is this: we are still a colony. Questions about change are furthermore problematic insofar as any account of the past is fraught: "The difficulty of recounting how much has changed matches the difficulty of describing what Hong Kong originally was" (Ibid). As I will discuss, the new colonialism of Mainland China has brought with it a new version of the past.

Identity and Nostalgia

In November 2017 I travelled to Hong Kong to attend its annual literary festival. The growing sense of a specific *Hong Kong* identity was a common theme in discussions throughout the week-long event, as was anxiety over the ability to retain that identity. During panels, author talks, and in private conversation, fears were raised about the continued ability of artists to express themselves freely, of the growing pressure to speak Mandarin (rather than Cantonese), and of fading hopes for political support from the outside world, to name just three. Ben Bland, a journalist working in Hong Kong, had released a book in time for the festival, *Generation HK: Seeking Identity in China's Shadow*, in which he argues the case for this blossoming sense of nationhood:

> identities are formed through exclusion, where a person can define oneself against the other. For many young people today, being a Hong Konger means not being a Mainlander. Surveys show that fewer and fewer young Hong Kongers see themselves as 'Chinese'. A long-running poll by the respected public opinion programme at the University of Hong Kong shows that the proportion of residents who describe themselves as simply Chinese fell from a high of 39 per cent in 2008 to just 16 per cent by the end of 2016. Over the same period, the proportion who see themselves as a 'Hong Konger' or 'Hong Konger in China' grew from 47 per cent to 64 per cent. (Bland, 2017, pp. 12 - 13)

This brings to mind Benedict Anderson who, in his seminal text on nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (first published in 1983), put forward a compelling thesis on the way in which national identity is realised. His concept of the nation as an 'imagined community' was not pejorative – he was not speaking of a collective delusion. Benedict Anderson's argument is that an individual can have a sense of belonging to a community: a place where one feels a kinship, common values, shared understandings with fellow citizens, even though the individual will never meet more than the small fraction of this community:

> It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (B. Anderson, 1998, p. 6)

In this way, Hong Kong is simply the latest of many nations that have been imagined into existence. Hong Kongers are drawing closer to each other in solidarity and empathy in the face of a truly existential threat. As shared values – freedom of speech, artistic expression, and judicial integrity – are placed under pressure, so these aspects of a collective identity are clarified.

In addition to external pressures, imagined communities are also based on myth-making. This requires a shared understanding about the past. It is here where we find one of the many intersections with Hong Kong and noir. As James Naremore argues, "most contemporary writing and filmmaking associated with noir provokes a mourning and melancholy for the past" (Naremore, 2008, p. 4). Noir mourns for what has been lost. And a yearning for what is lost is what produces a recurrent sense of nostalgia in noir discourse. It is important to clarify here that nostalgia in noir is not about *recapturing* the past, but remembering it; a way of saying 'this is how it used to be,' which is another way of saying *'this is who we were.'* Nostalgia is an act of remembering an era that, by definition, can never again be. As we are pushed, anxiously and inevitably, towards the future, noir laments the things that left behind. In John Woo's neo-noir film *The Killer* (1989), two characters look out over the Hong Kong skyline. The first says: "Our world is changing so fast. It never used to be like this! Perhaps we're too nostalgic." The second man replies: "Nostalgia is one of our saving graces." Nostalgia, in noir – and in the national manifestation of Hong Kong noir in particular – represents the desire to retain a sense of the self in a rapidly changing present.

Nostalgia is fundamental to Hong Kong cinema for two reasons: first, because it is a place with an expiry date. When the principle of 'one country, two systems' ends in 2047, by

definition the Hong Kong system – or way of life – ends. Stephen Teo believes being a place of borrowed times makes the city "unique among all human societies" (Teo, 2005a). Second, Hong Kong finds itself in a problematic position vis-a-vis the Mainland. Memory – and therefore history – is shifting and contestable. This nostalgia of Hong Kong noir is not a sentiment approved by Mainland Chinese authorities. If looking back nostalgically means missing what has been lost, or even thinking in an ambiguous way about a colonial past, then this is inconsistent with the narrative of the Mainland regime, who define the Handover as a historical justice. As China imagines a history for itself – in particular around the 'century of humiliation' at the hands of Western and Japanese colonialism – Hong Kong must as a corollary be press-ganged into this story.

Indeed, the past is being painstakingly redefined by the Mainland regime. For example, Hong Kong as a refuge from the horror of the Great Leap Forward, and from the violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution, is being steadily wiped from collective memory. The *Ip Man* series of films, starring Donnie Yen, is a prime example. These films tells the story – or 'a' story – of Ip Man, an aristocratic Chinese martial arts expert who lives the Confucian ideal in southern China (Tang, 2012). Ip Man valiantly fights against the Japanese invaders during the Second Sino-Japanese War, using his superior Kung Fu fighting style. In one scene, Ip Man says to a Japanese officer:

> *Chinese martial arts are Confucian in spirit. The virtue of martial arts is benevolence. You Japanese will never understand the principle of treating other peoples as you would yourselves.*

Eventually, he is forced to flee to Hong Kong. In a postscript to the film, we are told he becomes the celebrated martial arts teacher of perhaps the most famous Hong Konger of all: Bruce Lee.

The true history of Ip Man is substantially different. “The real Ip Man left China to escape not the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese war, but rather to escape the new Communist regime of mainland China” (Bowman, 2015, p. 315) The real Ip Man was an officer with the *Kuomintang* (the Nationalist party), the opponents of the Chinese regime (Tang, 2012). The aristocratic ‘Confucian ideal’ lived by the Ip Man depicted in the film – he resides in a mansion, has no job, is sufficiently idle and rich he spends his days perfecting his martial arts – was despised by the communists and much of the population at the time. The unspoken aspects of Chinese history are displaced onto Japan, and the history of Ip Man – and therefore the history of those who fled to Hong Kong during this tumultuous period – is re-imagined cinematically.

As argued by Paul Bowman in his essay ‘Return of the Dragon’:

> Hong Kong has been redrawn [through cinematic memory] – less as the ‘inter-zone’ that it once was… and more the *supplement*, the graft, the transplant, the prosthesis and opening of China. *The actual* recent history of the geopolitical entity of China is ignored. (Bowman, 2015, p. 317)

This urge to re-write history inevitably reaches into the absurd. Louisa Lim observes a scene in the star-studded Chinese propaganda film *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), where “Chairman Mao is seen bemoaning his inability to buy a cigarette, which he attributes to a lamentable lack of capitalists. ‘If there aren’t any businessmen, I can’t even buy cigarettes,’ he says, ‘let alone talk about market prosperity. We have to invite them back’” (Lim, 2015, p. 147). It is an urge that brings to mind the prescient and enduring ideas of George Orwell:

> From the totalitarian point of view history is something to be created rather than learned. A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible. But since, in practice, no one is infallible, it is frequently necessary to rearrange past events in order to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened… This

> kind of thing happens everywhere, but it is clearly likelier to lead to outright falsification in societies where only one opinion is permissible at any given moment. (Orwell, 1957, p. 164)

Hong Kong noir has hinted at a very different version of history, and – consistent with the definition of noir put forward by this essay – has taken an anti-hegemonic posture in doing so. Hong Kong cinema has imagined the forces of collective memory and identity with nuance and power. It is to two salient – though very different – examples of films noir this essay will now turn: *Infernal Affairs* and *2046*.

2046 **and** ***Infernal Affairs*****:** Forgetting and Remembering

Kathie: *"Is there a way to win?"*

Jeff: *"There's a way to lose more slowly."*

Out of the Past (1947)

In the lead-up to, and the aftermath of, the Handover in 1997, Hong Kong film went noir. This fertile period for dark cinema produced the likes of *City on Fire* (1987), *Bullet in the Head* (1990), *Hard-Boiled* (1992), *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Hollywood, Hong Kong* (2001), *Running on Karma* (2003), *One Night in Mongkok* (2004), and many others, that directly and indirectly expressed anxieties about the coming change (Yau & Williams, 2017). Stephen Teo argues, "so pervasive was the noir sensibility in the Hong Kong New Wave films (beginning in 1979) that it was not so much a New Wave as a Noir Wave" (Teo, 2014, p. 136). Julie Nakama states that one of the prime movers in Hong Kong noir, Wong Kar-wai, "is part of a generation of Hong Kong filmmakers whose work can be seen in response to two pivotal events in Hong Kong, the 1984 signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration detailing Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 and the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989" (Nakama, 2009, p. 1). Yingjin Zhang believes Hong Kong cinema, in the period immediately following the 1997 handover, can be classified into two categories: 'forgetting' and 'not forgetting' (Zhang, 2004, p. 269).

The two movies chosen as the focus of this chapter, *Infernal Affairs* (2002), and *2046* (2005), are films noirs that conform to the propositions put forward by Teo, Nakama, and Zhang. These two films – indirectly in the case of the former, directly in the latter – deal with Hong Kong's return to China. The directors – Andrew Lau and Alan Mak for *Infernal Affairs*, and

Wong Kar-wai for *2046* – are associated with the Noir Wave. While the two films are very different, and *2046* is atypical for a Hong Kong noir cinema insofar as it has neither crime nor criminals as central to the plot, both present salient examples of stories that deal with the fragility of memory, with forgetting and not-forgetting.

Infernal Affairs has dual main characters: one an inspector, Chan Wing-yan (played by Tony Leung) working undercover in a triad gang; the other a criminal, Lau Kin-ming (played by Andy Lau), a triad mole in the Hong Kong Police Force. Both have lived these fake lives for a decade. Chan's boss (Superintendent Wong) is the only one who knows the undercover officer's true identity. Later in the film, when Wong is killed, Chan is desperate to recover his lost identity. At one point, when the undercover cop and the triad mole meet on a rooftop looking out over Hong Kong, Chan says: "I'm a cop." To which Lau replies: "who knows?" Without collective memory, Chan's claim to his identity is meaningless. Thus, when Chan is killed towards the end of the film, he has been collectively forgotten by the city of Hong Kong.

Howard Choy argues, "Chan's failure in his identity readjustment and justification in the final rooftop scene allegorically implies the impossibility of return to the 'original' identity of the Chinese population in Hong Kong prior to the Opium War" (Choy, 2007, p. 62). While I agree with Choy insofar as *Infernal Affairs* is, in part, about the impossibility of return, I don't read this as implying a return to pre-British history, or that Lau and Mak, or Hong Kongers in general, desire this. Rather, it is about the main character's desire to return to his imperfect past, one where he is nonetheless able to reclaim his own identity. The allegorical implication we may draw is that this has been made impossible by a second type of return: the one imagined by the Mainland. This is not about embracing a pre-British past, but rather a

mono-historical present, with a concomitant pressure to embrace the shared vision of a bright new future. As Law Wang-Sing argues:

> the deadline of 1997 handover has compelled everyone to accept a monolithic and unified version of history according to which events form a linear progression. With the help of such a sweeping conception of time, Chinese nationalist narratives have turned 1997 not so much into an expiry date…so much as an injunction compelling every one of us to respond to a sacrosanct request: … 'straighten out your memories'. (Law, 2006, p. 386)

Memories are inherently fragile and contestable. Many in Hong Kong refuse to accept the hegemonic narrative of the Mainland, often by grasping at tokens of the past as a way of confirming the present; as a psychological means of fighting this inevitable future. This brings to mind the observation Anthony Dapiran makes about the vehement opposition to the demolition of heritage sites around Hong Kong. These protests were, in essence:

> arguing against the inevitability that everything has an expiry date in Hong Kong, a point made poignantly by film-maker Wong Kar-wai in his classic of Hong Kong cinema, *Chungking Express*, in which he compared fading love to an expiring tin of pineapple. 'Somehow everything comes with an expiry date,' muses lovelorn character He Qiwu, 'If memories could be canned would they also have expiry dates?' Activists' concerns stemmed from a desire to ensure that Hong Kong's distinct identity – an identity contained within the collective memories surrounding these heritage sites and communities – did not expire along with those memories. (Dapiran, 2017, p. 64)

In *Infernal Affairs*, the existential struggle of the main characters reflects the existential struggle of the Hong Kong people. Not just a refusal to be forgotten, but an assertion of the right to define the self: a self-definition that is certainly not British, but not Mandarin-speaking Chinese, either. A capitalist enclave in a communist polity; not celebrating independence from colonialism, but rather anxiously awaiting 'recolonization' by the powerful Mainland (Choy, 2007).

The narrative of Wong Kar-wai's atmospheric, moody film noir, *2046*, has multiple strands. One follows a Japanese man named Tak, travelling on a train from the year 2046 back in time. Those who make this journey do so to "recapture lost memories" in the future. He is the first person who has managed to return from this journey. The Tak strand is actually a story within a story written by the protagonist of *2046*, Chow Wo-man (played by Tony Leung). In this second plotline, Chow writes the story '2046' in the year 1967 for a woman, Wan Jing-wen (played by Faye Wong). Chow intends to write a story about her love of a Japanese man (a relationship Wan Jing-wen's father forbids), but realises, too late, that he is really writing the story of his *own* love for her. After she leaves Hong Kong to marry her Japanese lover, Chow sends the story to her. Sometime later he hears word that she loved the story, but has asked if Chow could change the ending, as it was 'too sad'. He tries, sitting at his desk for 100 hours, pen poised above the paper. Chow can't change the sad ending; he can't change a word. This is one of the themes of *2046*: sad endings can never be changed (except, perhaps, for those who leave Hong Kong).

A third plot strand involves Bai Ling (played by Zhang Ziyi), Chow's neighbour and occasional high-class prostitute. Bai Ling falls in love with Chow, who never returns her affection. They become lovers, but he remains emotionally detached. They drift apart and when she returns, he spurns her affection. She asks him, desperately, "why can't it be like it was before?" Again, another theme of the film (and of *Infernal Affairs*): nothing can be like it was before. Hong Kong can never travel back to the past. Film critic Nathan Lee says, of *2046*: "The trials of the present are projected onto the future…*2046* is a spectacular act of self-interrogation. *Why can't it be like it was before"* (N. Lee, 2005).

Unlike *Infernal Affairs*, *2046* is not an immediately obvious candidate for a film noir, especially in the context of Hong Kong cinema, which has overwhelmingly been centred on

the *jingfei pian* (cops and robbers) film (Teo, 2014, p. 137). I offer some arguments for the affirmative. The protagonist, Chow Mo-wan, is a journalist – which, while not a necessarily noir archetype, is certainly the stereotypical outsider. He's a freelancer, which makes his position even more tenuous, and when the journalistic opportunities dry up, he turns to salacious fiction. Stephen Teo describes him as a "world-weary, alcoholic writer scraping a living from writing martial arts and pornographic pulp fiction" and adds "his precarious existence in Hong Kong in the 1960s is the result of a fundamental clash of values: writing as an art and writing as a commercial enterprise" (Teo, 2005a). Thus we have many of the classic noir elements: the cynical, alienated protagonist, both in the existential and Marxist sense. He does not own – nor even care about – the product of his own labour: he writes porn and martial arts merely to pay the bills. Chow also has affairs with several women. He tries to remain self-contained throughout, to stay emotionally remote from the women in his life. He "lends" his time to others but never truly gives to them. Rather, he uses women as "time-fillers".

Further consistent with this essay's definition of noir, the film is pervaded with a sense of "sadness, fatalism and resignation" (Nakama, 2009, p. 136), a sentiment echoed by Stephen Teo (Teo, 2005a). While the environment of *2046* is not extreme, it is almost always night, and water is ever-present, whether in the form of rain, or the tears of the characters. *2046* is also concerned with power, though in a subtle, shifting, sometimes opaque ways. Stephen Teo notes that, on the one hand, Wong Kar-wai:

> had conceived the project as early as 1997, intending it to be a film about the implications of Hong Kong's return to China…Wong meant the title to be a reference to the last year of the fifty-year deadline in which China had promised there would be no change in in Hong Kong's political and economic system (Teo, 2005b, p. 134).

Yet on the other hand, Wong Kar-wai denied he had anything political in mind (Ibid.). This latter denial of any political content by the director is somewhat strange, and one that could be attributed to his fears about offending the Mainland Chinese regime. At the very least, Wong Kar-wai would have been cognisant of the need to step carefully. Here, I believe, we can see political power inserting itself into the artistic process.

The fate of the series of short films collectively titled *Ten Years* (2015) saliently demonstrates the challenges faced by Hong Kong film-makers in producing overtly political cinema. The five short films – directed by Kwok Zune, Wong Fei-pang, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun-Wai, and Ng Ka-Leung – form a dystopian anthology predicting how life will be under Chinese rule ten years hence. The film was enormously popular, grossing more than Star *Wars: the Force Awakens* (2015) (which opened at the same time) in its opening week. Despite its popularity, only a handful of cinemas would screen the movie, and a month after its release it was dropped completely. The Chinese Communist party-controlled *Global Times* called the films a "virus of the mind" that Hong Kong should reject (Bland, 2017, p. 88). When the anthology later won Best Film in the Hong Kong Film Awards (Hong Kong's premier award for cinema), the state-owned China Central Television announced it would not cover the event, as it had done every year since 1991. Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Awards, Derek Yee, said it had been hard to find anyone willing to present the award (A. Wong, 2016). Many believe this is because, in recent times, artists perceived to have any pro-democracy sympathies have been blacklisted from productions on the Chinese Mainland (Ibid.)

Lastly, I turn to the alienation caused by forgetting and amnesia – central to the plot of *2046* – which is perhaps the film's clearest link to noir. Film critic Emanuel Levy argues *2046* possesses "the central noir motif", which is "how impossible it is to return to or recreate the past" (Levy, 2005). Manohla Dargis argues in her *New York Times* review:

> Like film itself, memory freezes time. Memory turns finite moments into spaces – a hotel room, say – that we return to again and again. It gives us a glimpse of the eternal and, like art at its most sublime, like this film, a means for transcendence. (Dargis, 2005)

Seemingly contradicting Levy, Dargis argues *it is* possible to recreate the past; though perhaps here it is more accurate to observe that these two critics are not necessarily in disagreement, because Levy is arguing it is impossible to literally recreate the past, or to return to an era where somehow values and identity were known and shared. As L. P. Hartley opens the novel, *The Go-Between* (1953): "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." It is, however, possible to return to a *subjective illusion* of the past, to a fragile memory. If memory does turn finite moments into spaces, as Dargis believes, in *2046* they are spaces from which we may never return. While the science-fictional train in *2046* may travel forward to the year 2046 to recapture lost memories, no-one can come back. As Julie Nakama states:

> In Chow's case, to repeat the past is to be forever stranded on the train to 2046, a journey which is somewhere between memory and the future. For Chow, the compulsion to return to the past, a past which coexists with the present and the future, is a compulsion to build, destroy and rebuild an identity while simultaneously denying the power of the present or the authority of the future. (Nakama, 2009, pp. 23 - 24)

Infernal Affairs is a rather odd, punning title in English. Indeed, one of the few criticisms I could find from western reviewers on the film's release was of the title. The Chinese name of the film, however, is something very different: *Wujiandao,* which translates to 'The Unceasing Path', a reference to *Avici*, the lowest level of the Buddhist hell. The movie starts with the words, onscreen: 'The worst of the Eight Hells is called Continuous Hell – it has the meaning of continuous suffering', which Law Wing-Sang believes literally refers to "the deepest hell, without temporal or spatial difference" (Law, 2006, p. 389). There is a linkage

here to *2046*, where the protagonist of *Infernal Affairs,* Chan Wing-yan, exists in a hell of changeless time, waiting to leave and return to his real life, waiting for his true identity to be reclaimed. Yet he can never return, because he does not exist in the memory of others. Much like *2046*, the past can never be recaptured. Vivian Lee concludes that the role of a paused temporality in *2046* is a means to salvage the future:

> If *2046* is a haunting tale about the end of an era that propels the historical subject into "changeless time," …the film also invites the viewer to *see* beyond predetermined colonial and national time-spaces in order to envision and connect to other memories and images… For any future imagination to be feasible, that is, for "changeless time" to be undone, the true implication of the past has to be salvaged from its nostalgic aura and recast in the complex ambivalences of the present. (V. Lee, 2013)

This is persuasive, and yet the complex ambivalences of the present have no place in Mainland China's vision of the future. While *Infernal Affairs* and *2046* thematically address the theme of historical purgatory – as a people wait for a future to arrive – the period of 'changeless time' has already passed. In today's Hong Kong, the train to 2047 is most certainly moving, and the doubts and ambivalences of the years immediately following 1997 have been replaced by stark realities.

The conception of Hong Kong's one true past, as imagined by the Mainland, is increasingly at the forefront of popular as well as political culture. Hong Kong's unique rights: artistic expression, association, protest, and judicial independence, are unquestionably in decline (Bland, 2017; Dapiran, 2017; Law, 2006; Tai, 2018; A. Wong, 2016). The train towards a new colonialism picks up pace each year, driving harder and harder towards a hegemonic future.

Conclusion

The story of Hong Kong is the story of noir. The fate of the city – to be subsumed politically into the mainland – seems inevitable, and this inevitability is met with a sense of sorrow and loss. Hong Kong's history is one of empire, of the hegemons of different eras claiming the place as their own. This claim was and is not just military and political, but also one of the imagination: inventing pasts, presents, and futures for the city. Hong Kong, in turn, has imagined its own reality through cinema. This imagining has sometimes been overt, but in the main has been one of subtlety and ambivalence. Noir provides the perfect vehicle for these kinds of imaginings, concerned as it has always been with nostalgia for a lost past, and with the alienation caused by modernity. Hong Kong's experience of modernity is characterised, in particular, by its experience with colonialism and capitalism. Both have, without question, been transformative to the city, and both have, in different ways, torn the city away from its historical roots and propelled it into an uncertain future.

The focus on the relationship of memory to identity is, perhaps more than any other factor, that which characterises Hong Kong noir. As argued by Law Wing Sang: "one can argue with rigor that Hong Kong cinema's booming interest in time and memory derives from a widespread reflexive awareness about time relative to the nature of the 1997 problem" (Law, 2006, p. 387). Imagined communities need machine memory. Whereas Benedict Anderson focussed on the machine of the printing press in *Imagined Communities*, the machine memory of Hong Kong noir has been in film. These memories are sometimes fast and furious, sometimes languid and melancholic, but like all memories, they are fragmented and they are fragile.

Hong Kong noir is distinct in having a collective alienation, a society unmoored from its past: a past that is being actively re-written by a far more powerful force. Much as *2046* has the

1967 riots as a backdrop to the narrative, Hong Kong noir is not so shallow as to imagine the past was superior. Rather, in the noir tradition, it is nostalgic for the past as a way of understanding the present. It is concerned with memory as the key to identity, both collective and individual. It is not simply that noir has been a convenient form with which to explore the themes of memory, loss, and alienation in Hong Kong – it is by *far the most powerful and relevant form* to explore an anxiety about the future in a way that no other society can understand: as a city stamped with an expiry date.

Chapter Four – Japan

Android Noir: Modernity's Unease

Cyberpunk blends the evocation of extravagant historical possibilities with the most hard-bitten and unillusioned of narrative styles, borrowed from the historical forms of the detective story and the film noir, which choke off the exhilaration of futurity.

Dan North – Ghost in the Shell: the Noir Instinct

Introduction

Ghost in the Shell (1995) is a landmark event of Japanese anime and global cyberpunk, a film that powerfully articulates contemporary fears about technology and its impact on our humanity. It explores the relationship between body and mind, between memory and identity, and between slavery and freedom. It also articulates ideas *beyond* these binary expressions, and hence beyond the duality so often expressed in Western thinking. *Ghost in the Shell* is a discourse about the fusion of genders, ethnicities, and nationalities into a single being; of the other within the self; about being simultaneously one and many.

Ghost in the Shell conforms to the definition of noir proposed by this essay. The mood of the film is bleak, saturated by neon and rain. The protagonist is in a state of alienation – from herself and society around her – in particular through her nature as an android wholly owned

by the government. *Ghost in the Shell* is concerned with the systemic corruption of government and the many tentacles of its grasping power.

The anime exemplifies a specifically Japanese manifestation of noir in two ways: first, in its exploration of how technology transforms society and the human body, and the awesome potential of this advancement for either good or evil; second, in its depiction of technology as both metaphor and a literal example of pervasive control. Metaphorically, through the sense of one's body and labour no longer being one's own, in being given over to an avaricious economic system, and literally, through our cyborg present, where the instruments of control and prostheses insinuate themselves into the day-to-day lives of us all.

A History of Ambiguity

Japanese history embodies the ambiguity of technological progress perhaps more profoundly than that of any other nation on earth. On the one hand, the decision to embrace western technology during the Meiji restoration (1868 – 1912) led Japan to becoming a global military power, joining the Entente powers (Russia, France, United Kingdom) during World War I, and helping them secure victory (Pilling, 2014). Later, in the aftermath of World War II, under US administration, Japan rose from the ashes of humiliating defeat to become the most technologically-advanced nation on Earth.

On the other hand, Japan is the only nation to have experienced the horror of nuclear war, to have suffered the fullest measure of the destructive power of modernity. The atomic bomb: the apotheosis of scientific discovery, brought about the most barbaric single moment of mass violence in human history. The horrific consequences were powerfully exposed in John Hersey's seminal long essay, *Hiroshima*:

> He was the only person making his way into the city; he met hundreds and hundreds who were fleeing, and every one of them seemed to be hurt in some way. The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns—of undershirt straps and suspenders and, on the skin of some women (since white repelled the heat from the bomb and dark clothes absorbed it and conducted it to the skin), the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos… Almost all had their heads bowed, looked straight ahead, were silent, and showed no expression whatsoever. (Hersey, 1986, pp. 39 - 40)

The traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have lingered in the Japanese national consciousness. At the finale of the seminal anime cyberpunk *Akira* (1988) – set in a dystopian

2019 – a white incandescent blast swallows Neo-Tokyo, leaving a skeleton city in its aftermath. As Frank Fuller argues:

> The finale of Akira is only one example of apocalyptic imagery in the anime and manga canon; a number of anime films and comics are rife with atomic bomb references, which appear in any number of forms, from the symbolic to the literal. The devastating aftereffects – orphaned kids, radiation sickness, a loss of national independence, the destruction of nature – would also influence the genre, giving rise to a unique (and arguably incomparable) form of comics and animated film. (Fuller, 2015)

A growing body of scholarship has emerged from the idea of 'trans-generational trauma', focussing on the descendants of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Psychologist Robert Motta argues: "Trauma is a contagious disease; it affects everyone that has close contact with a traumatized person" (Stillman, 2014). For many decades, the surviving victims – and the descendants – of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were shunned by Japanese society (Shintomi, 2015). To be called *hibakusha*, or 'explosion-affected person', was simultaneously an honorific and a source of shame. "Even grandchildren have often feared telling romantic partners of their grandparents' experience, worried that their genetic material would be perceived as spoiled goods" (Stillman, 2014). While *Ghost in the Shell* has no specific allusions to nuclear devastation, it does very much dwell on the birth and rebirth of Major Motoko. Fuller argues this is a common plot device in Japanese anime and manga, used to symbolise the country's wartime and post-war experiences (Fuller, 2015).

Hikawa Ryūsuke, in documenting the history of cyborgs in Japanese popular culture, writes: "The Japanese conception of cyborgs was, in a sense, a self-portrait of postwar Japan itself" (Ryūsuke, 2017). Similarly, Sharalyn Orbaugh writes: "Japanese popular-culture forms work through issues of apocalypse, survival, and the impossibility of establishing innocence far

more often and in terms of greater moral complexity than those of North America" (Orbaugh, 2002).

Fay and Nieland argue that noir has often expressed:

> the health, sickness or decay of nations either corrupted or reinvigorated by foreign influences and perspectives. And they [films noir] have functioned for critics and scholars as celluloid clocks telling the time of national life (its rootedness in tradition, or its movement into the future, or its traumatic upheavals, displacements, and confusions) and keeping pace with global movements that may render that life a phenomenon of the past. (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. xiii)

Ghost in the Shell is consistent with this proposition. The movie – released in 1995 – came after a period of rapid economic growth and change during the 1980s, where for a time it looked as though Japan might even ascend above the United States. This fear of a rising Japan is evident in many US films of that era, including *Back to the Future II* (1989) (where the corporate bosses are all Japanese), *Robo Cop III* (1993) (where a Japanese corporation owns Detroit), and the overtly anti-Japanese novel *Rising Sun* (1992) by Michael Crichton, which was fiercely critical of Japanese business practices. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* was far more sophisticated, assuming the future domination of Japanese corporations, though not expressing any moral opinion on this eventuality. (For Gibson, the nationality of the corporation was moot. In his novels the corporation is depicted as supranational – albeit with Japanese characteristics – and the mechanisms of control are not nation-specific, but rather inherent to the Leviathan-like powers of these giant, sprawling, and pervasive entities.) The timing of the emergence of Cyberpunk through short story, novel, and film – in particular *Neuromancer* in 1984 and *Blade Runner* in 1982 – gave the subgenre an East Asian hue, coinciding as it did with the rise – or rebirth – of Japan.

However, the Japanese economy collapsed in the early 1990s. This period was at first called the 'Lost Decade' but eventually dubbed the 'Lost Score', taking in the period 1990 – 2010 (Pilling, 2014). Through the 1980s and 1990s, as a new and mercurial Japanese economy spurred societal change, and technological progress seemed insistent and unstoppable, "Artists began to reflect on what might mean for a hyper-connected, de-personalised society", and this was reflected in the anime and manga of the time (Baker, 2017).

These anxieties are not merely external, regarding the creative destruction of economic change, but they are also internal, regarding the existential crisis of living in a radically changing society, and the transformative possibilities technology holds out for the body and the mind. Bruce Sterling, one of the figureheads of early Cyberpunk, argues:

> Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self. (Sterling, 1986, p. ix)

Consistent with this, *Ghost in the Shell* is concerned with the invasion of the body and the mind, and with the corollary this has for the human condition. The android as noir archetype has been chosen the focus of this chapter, because, as argued by Sharalyn Orbaugh, "the various issues at the heart of the cyborg paradigm are explored in Japanese popular culture perhaps more thoroughly than anywhere else" (Orbaugh, 2002, p. 2).

Ghost in the Shell

Ghost in the Shell (1995), directed by Mamuro Oshii, is an anime based on the manga of the same name by Masamune Shirow – though Mamoru was also heavily influenced by *Blade Runner* (Rucka, 2004). Masamune took the name of his manga from *Ghost in the Machine* by Arthur Koestler (Koestler, 1967), a philosophical inquiry into human consciousness in the age of the machine. Suderman writes that Koestler addressed the idea that humanity's existence may have been, "an evolutionary error, and dealt with humanity's propensity to violence and awareness of the inevitability of death — all ideas that would come into play, in various ways, throughout *Ghost in the Shell's* story" (Suderman, 2017). This chapter focusses on the 1995 film, with some references to the source manga (published over 1989 – 1991). The remainder of the *Ghost in the Shell* franchise – five anime sequels, a live action remake, two manga sequels, the three animated series, and multiple video game versions – while worthy of analysis, do not have the breadth of critical influence and commercial success of the original manga and film. James Cameron, for example, called the 1995 *Ghost in the Shell*, "A stunning work of speculative fiction… the first to reach a level of literary excellence" (Kelly, 2017), and in Japan – though originally a failure at the box office – it has in later years made an 'indelible' mark on Japanese anime (Ryūsuke, 2017).

The protagonist is Major Motoko, a public security agent working for 'Section Nine'. The Major is a cyborg: she has a full cybernetic body, but her brain still has the original organic material and the memories of her human self. While she is treated as human by those around her, she does not own her own shell, or even the memories she forms while working for the government:

> Combining modernity and monstrosity, the film explores how the cyborg is the ultimate mechanization of the human being for pure labor, leaving no room for pleasure, leisure, desire, or anything else that is not profitable for the employer and the State. Motoko is a Japanese female cyborg sporting a feminine body with large breasts, but no vagina. Her body is owned by the police agency Section Nine, and it is completely mechanical besides her ghost. (Grubb, 2017, p. 2)

While the manga and the anime share important philosophical roots, they do depart on this count. In the manga, the Major has sex with both men and women – though this is not a central aspect of her character. In contradistinction, the film quite deliberately portrays the Motoko as feminine but not female, sexy without the possibility of sex. Consistent with Grubb's argument, above, the film pushes harder on the theme of the Major's alienation, in this case even from her own sexuality. For both manga and anime, while she is treated as human, she is – like Deckard from *Blade Runner* – a slave.

Early in the film, it is revealed that an individual arrested by the Major has been 'ghost hacked' by the story's antagonist, the Puppet Master. The victim's memories have been wiped, and new ones implanted in its place. When the victim asks for his old memories back, he is told it is impossible; that they have been permanently erased. The man breaks down. Major Motoko watches all of this through a one-way mirror, seemingly absorbed in the plight of the victim. We, the viewer, see her reflection looking back at her from the glass, darkly. As we soon discover, the Major holds the existential fear that her memories, too, have been implanted. She fears she is like the victim: a pathetic creature, an empty shell for someone else's agenda.

Later, Major and Batou (a colleague from her team, who is partly cybernetic, though not as completely as the Major) are spending some downtime on a boat, chatting over a beer. Batou is questioning the reasoning behind her diving in the ocean: "Why do you gamble swimming

with a body that can sink like a rock? What the hell is it you see in the bottom, in the darkness?" The Major replies: "What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror, then we shall see face-to-face." This is a reference to 1 Corinthians 13: 11-12, this full text of which is:

> When I was a child, my speech, feelings and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am a man, I have no more use for childish ways. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete as god's knowledge of me.

One of the strange elements of this scene is that it is Motoko's *ghost* who says this, via neural link, to Batou. In *Ghost in the Shell*, the characters occasionally communicate without verbalising, but rather through this neural link (though normally over long distances, instead of a phone).

Batou responds: "That was you, wasn't it?"

The Major does not answer him, but rather looks around, surprised. The voice came from her mind, but the words were not consciously thought by her. The camera, at this moment, focusses on the 'jacks' at the back of her neck (where she may plug into the 'net').

This moment is difficult to parse, and has attracted different interpretations by scholars. Many argue – and in the main I agree – that it foreshadows a moment later in the movie, where the Major 'merges' with the Puppet Master (Orbaugh, 2002; Stoddard, 2010). The Major is a child now, as she is wedded to her shell; she becomes fully-formed when she merges with a non-corporeal being. Sharalyn Orbaugh suggests the passage is referring to a 'new stage in evolution', that the childhood of the Corinthians quote is the childhood of the cyborg body, her 'adult' identity is her later 'unlimited existence on the Net' (Orbaugh, 2002, p. 447). The implication is that her consciousness yearns to evolve, but is limited by

containment in her shell. This interpretation is further reinforced in the memorable final fight against the spider tank. The establishing shot of the tank is at the base of an ancestral tree carved in the stone wall – a bas relief, beginning at the base with Latin names of aquatic forms, and ending at the top with *hominis* (Man). During the battle, the tank destroys the tree – a deliberately-framed shot shows projectiles colliding with the base of the tree and working their way up, destroying the structure of creation.

While the intent of the director in this scene seems clear, I suggest there is an additional layer of meaning. The evolution to a new being also represents the fears of viewers, and the leap we are taking into new modes of being. The plot not only foreshadows the Major's future; it is also very much interested in her present, in her existential crisis. Her crisis is our crisis, in the age of the machine. We see ourselves through a glass, darkly, much as the Major does. The anime turns to this idea time and again: her reflection in a mirror as she watches an interrogation; her reflection in the water when she rises towards the surface; when she sees her doppelgänger working in a high-rise (presumably, the same production model as the Major, tasked for a more mundane purpose – or, alternatively, a vision, a trick of her ghost). She questions the nature of her being, much as humanity has been doing for eons:

> **Major:** *Well, I guess cyborgs like myself have a tendency to be paranoid about our origins. Sometimes I suspect I'm not who I think I am. Like maybe I died a long time ago, and somebody took my brain and stuck it in this body. Maybe there never was a real me in the first place.*

The iconic opening of *Ghost in the Shell* shows the Major being 'born' or created. Her brain is inserted into a cyborg shell: her body emerging, fully formed, from a liquid. It is not clear when the sequence occurs, nor is it clear if the cyborg is the major, or a model like hers. The audience does not know if she was born only recently, with false memories inserted (like Deckard from *Blade Runner*), or a long time ago. After multiple viewings, my interpretation

is that the Major is *dreaming* the opening sequence. When her manufacture is complete, she wakes from sleep.

However, the question of the Major's subjectivity – whether she is who she thinks she is – is never answered (again, like *Blade Runner*), and in this phenomenological ambiguity two things are communicated. The first is the alienation caused by modernity: in the late stage capitalism depicted in *Ghost in the Shell*, the engine of economic growth has found ways to intrude into areas once unimaginable. She is a very physical person, insofar as she is the most accomplished fighter, assassin, and infiltrator in her unit. Her physicality is prominent in both film and manga. Yet, this core aspect of her character is not her own; her body is owned by the government.

This has resonance in contemporary Japan, and to the modern condition more generally. Salarymen, in Japan, are the most obvious example of those who appear owned by the corporation they work for. Roger Ebert believes Major Motoko appeals to Japanese salarymen, because the conditions and hours of work are "so exhausting and dehumanizing that many men (who form the largest part of the animation audience) project both freedom and power onto women" (Ebert, 1996). While this is one of several possible interpretations of the male attraction to the Major, what is important here is the identity-subsuming intensity of the Japanese workplace.

This intensity, however, is not only true of Japan in the contemporary labour market. In the giant Amazon warehouses of North America and the UK, every second of a worker's day is tabulated and assessed, and the worker can be punished for toilet breaks (Ghosh, 2018). Similarly, at the Apple factories in China, long hours and sustained pressure have resulted in multiple suicides, and the need to place 'suicide nets' to stop workers throwing themselves to death from the upper floors (Bhattacharya, 2016; Merchant, 2017). Though the details of the

work conditions are sometimes disputed – especially by the company being criticised – the broader realities of the modern workforce, and the *capacity* for every second of a worker's day to be monitored and parsed, is indisputable.

The second issue raised – something the Major herself ponders – is *whether being human even matters.* This is a more challenging proposition, in that it can lead the viewer to interpret it as devaluing human life, and that the message of *Ghost in the Shell* is anti-humanist. However, I suggest that cyberpunk – and noir in general – is a humanist literature insofar as it is a meditation on the human condition, and it treats humanity (or being treated humanely) as a normative good. The narrative sympathies are always with the marginalised in these texts, and the extent to which the structures of power erode human dignity. The cyborg is a salient archetype (while the cyborg differs from the android – insofar as the android has no human components, whereas the cyborg began life as a human being – the two serve the same thematic purpose) as it tests the extent to which our humanity is bound in our physicality. Hikawa Ryūsuke observes: "The question is not how human cyborgs can become, but rather, how much of our biological selves can be stripped away and replaced with machines before we ourselves lose our humanity" (Ryūsuke, 2017).

Fredric Jameson argues, in discussing Gibson's *Neuromancer:*

> The protagonist, Case, is a hacker who has been equipped with jacks that give him direct and immediate contact with the space of the new and enlarged Internet. In a sense, this is a quick and easy solution to the mind/body problem which has tormented philosophy for so many years, and yet is an idealist one. For while serving as this conduit, he must abandon his body which he thinks of as "dead meat," slumped lifeless in the front of the computer. It is paradoxical (and rare) for idealism to express itself with such obscenity, and revealing that it must draw on a disgust with the physical as acute as anything in idealistic philosophy from Plato to Bergson in order to reaffirm the primacy of the "spirit" or of the realm of the opposite of matter. (Jameson, 2015)

Yet, while characters within cyberpunk will sometimes express a disgust for ‘meat space’, as noted by Jameson, I cannot find a single example in the cyberpunk subgenre where the underlying theme reifies the upload over the body. This may sometimes be true of utopian science fiction, such as James Cameron’ *Avatar*, where the protagonist’s mind is uploaded, and this is treated as superior to his wheelchair-bound body. Yet, while cyberpunk will – at most – consider the upload with a sense of wonder and endless possibility, it always presents nagging, persistent doubts about what this ability will do to our individual humanity, and to society as a whole.

I will turn now to the concerns *Ghost in the Shell* raises about our cyborg present.

A Cyborg Present

Cyborgs are not about the future, they are about contemporary society and its current transformations.

Sharalyn Orbaugh – Sex and the Single Cyborg

Max More is a philosopher and 'futurist' who defines the transhumanist movement as "a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life promoting principles and values" (More, 2009). While transhumanism intersects with cyberpunk in several ways, it is at cross purposes insofar as some utopian strands of the transhumanist movement are of the 'meat space' variety of thinking, identifying something inherently inferior about the biological body (Emmons, 2018). Transhumanism is interested in, among other things, the possibility of advancing human evolution through genetic manipulation, cyborgs, A. I., and mind uploads: possibilities all critiqued by tech noir, whether genetic coding (*Gattaca,* 1997), cyborgs (*Ghost in the Shell*), A.I. (*Terminator,* 1984) or mind uploads (*Altered Carbon,* 2002).

While some readers may nod at – and others simply skim past – the quote that heads this section, the idea of a cyborg present is worth discussing in more detail, if only to draw attention to developments often taken for granted in contemporary society; developments that represent radical changes to who we are now. A prime example is an item simultaneously mundane, ubiquitous, science fictional, and prosthetic: the smartphone. The smartphone is mundane and ubiquitous as, within a decade, it has become an indispensable and

unremarkable object for almost all people living in advanced economies (and many in the developing world). It is science fictional insofar as, thirty years ago, the smartphone was only dreamt of in science fiction narratives (indeed the first time tablets appeared on screen was in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in 1987 (Foreman, 2016)). The smartphone is prosthetic insofar as it functions as exo-memory:

> The human memory is no longer required to store or recall much now that vast resources of information are only a mouse-click away. We have already willingly given up so much in the name of access and convenience, that we barely notice each time we are asked to surrender a little more. (Emmons, 2018)

The neural networks of our brains constantly rewire themselves as we commit new experiences to long term memory. If the reader remembers anything from this essay one week from now, it means this essay has changed the structure of their brain (Kandel, 2007). Eric Kandel, who won the Nobel prize for his work on memory, writes:

> Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seems to be several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalisation, concentration of consciousness, are its essence. It implies the withdrawal from some things to effectively deal with others. (Kandel, 2007, p. 307)

Studies have found that the more a subject depends on exo-memory, the more their capacity for natural memory declines. An individual no longer needs to pay attention: they can rely on Google, instead of their own brains, to store knowledge long-term (Cohen, 2011; Perry, 2016; Wegner, 2011). Dan North refers to the society that grows up with the smartphone as living in "a culture of quotation where memory has been externalised, made readily accessible but located outside the body and attenuated from lived experience" (North, 2015, p. 86).

Individuals increasingly use the internet not just as exo-memory, but as an exo-brain; an always accessible vast repository of data. In what was until recently considered a science-fictional concept, many have ceded *what they pay attention to* (perhaps, in part, because of the vastness of the data one must sift through) to the algorithms of the major social media companies, all of whom are giant corporations (Carr, 2015). Jaron Lanier, an early pioneer of Silicon Valley and computer scientist, has extensively documented the invasive data collection techniques used by the major tech companies, and the way this is used to manipulate users. During an interview with neuroscientist Sam Harris, Lanier was put the proposition: "When you're using Facebook, you're not actually Facebook's customer; the advertiser is, and you are the product." Lanier answered. "That formulation… It's mostly true, but not exactly true… Your demonstrated change in behaviour from it otherwise would have been is the product. Your loss of free will is the product" (Harris, 2018).

As exo-memory has evolved – from the printing press, to the internet, to the smartphone – so too has the human brain evolved. Consciousness, in this sense, has expanded; individuals now possess information and the ability to access it, via exo-brains, which would appear super-human to someone living only fifty years ago. We are all cyborgs now – whether prosthetics, organ transplants, pacemakers, digital exo-memory; the outsourcing of brain function to the algorithmic decision making of major corporations, to choose the products we will purchase; the news articles we will read; the intimate relationships we will embark upon. We are living in a cyberpunk present. The question of what it means to be human is not merely philosophical, but pressing down in the mundane and the ubiquitous. The response of *Ghost in the Shell* to the pervasiveness of these changes is with a nuanced search for human identity. It contrasts the fully human, versus the cyborg, versus the noncorporeal online entity.

Ghost in the Shell includes characters that are proponents for transhumanism, such as the Puppet Master, who states that the noncorporeal individual is inherently superior, and truly liberated. The Puppet Master considers himself a more advanced lifeform. At the end of the film, the Major, as well, evolves to a point where she may not consider herself human anymore (though this is left ambiguous).

And yet, the most persuasive and consistent arguments made by the film is for humanism. When Togusa, the one member of Section Nine without any cyborg upgrades, asks Major Motoko why she had him transferred to the unit, she replies:

> **Major:** *"We need a guy like you."*
>
> **Togusa:** *"Huh?"*
>
> **Major:** *"Number one, you're an honest cop. Number two, you've never stepped out of line. Three, you're a family man, and – except for a slight brain augmentation, your body is almost completely human. If we all reacted the same way, we'd be predictable. And there's always more than one way to view a situation. What's true for the group is also true for the individual. It's simple: overspecialise, and you breed in weakness. It's slow death."*

Batou, too, argues for humanism (however expanded his definition) when he insists the Major is as human as anyone else, and is treated as if she were human ("you're treated like other humans, so stop with the angst"). For the Major, her key concern – and the key theme of the movie as a whole – is how to define and assert her humanity. Dan Baker argues, of the Major's existential crisis: "to know and be fully known is the great, overarching quest of humanity" (Baker, 2017).

Hikawa Ryūsuke argues that the 'real obsession' of the creator of the manga, Masamune Shirow, was the "essence of what it means to be human" (Ryūsuke, 2017). The director Mamoru Oshii believed his fundamental task to explore the Major's quest to understand and

realise her own humanity (Barder, 2017). This intent is true more broadly of noir. Fay & Nieland argue:

> noir humanism… offers a specific vision of human agency as increasingly governed by forces beyond reason or rational control, not only within the human (passion, madness, trauma and the like), but beyond and abstracted from human capacity in the very modernity of the modern world. (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. 8)

At the conclusion of *Ghost in the Shell*, the Major evolves by merging with the entity of the Puppet Master. In the anime, she takes the body of a female child. In the manga, she takes a male form. Neither suggests she has gained a higher form of being. In both anime and manga, the Major has freed herself of Section Nine. After recuperating at Batou's safe house, she tells him she's going. He asks her whether she is part of the Puppet Master now: whether he will be part of her forever.

> **Major:** *Batou, remember the words I spoke in another voice on the boat that night? I understand it now, and there are more words that go with the passage. When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were those of a child. Now that I am a man I have no more use for childish ways. Now I can say these things without help in my own voice, because I am no longer the woman known as The Major, nor am I the program called the Puppet Master.*

She leaves the safehouse, pausing out front to look out at the neon cityscape. "Where does the newborn go from here? The net is vast and infinite."

Conclusion

The question of the authenticity of the Major's identity is never answered: neither she, nor the audience, ever learn whether her memories are real. A second question, however, is answered: whether it is possible to retain one's humanity as technology more aggressively penetrates everyday life. *Ghost in the Shell* answers with a qualified yes. When the Major merges with the Puppet Master at the finale of the film, she does it to be free, and to establish her own identity. She is not claiming superiority, but rather claiming her own life, and body, back from the government and corporations that owned it. From this point on, her choices, memories, and shell will all be her own.

The humanist instinct is something Japanese noir shares with international noir. For all the cynicism, the darkness, the unflinching assessments of the human condition, noir is ultimately a humanistic discourse. It is a critique of and a warning against the dehumanising aspects of late capitalism. It laments what may be lost in history's unrelenting, unthinking march.

Under the harsh glare of a neon-lit future in Japan, *Ghost in the Shell* explores the plight of humanity in an age of cyberpunk: an age that has come, that surrounds us, that intrudes on every facet of contemporary life. We are cyborgs, living in a science fictional world, and the ideas of *Ghost in the Shell*, grimly fumbling for human dignity among the cold hard certitudes of technological progress, are more important than ever.

Chapter Five – Australia

Sunshine Noir: *A Great Silence*

Introduction

Australian Sunshine Noir delivers social realism, rather than the stylized realism of US noir. Grit is found embedded under the fingernails, not applied as an aesthetic affectation. Sunshine Noir takes place in the outback under an unblinking sun, rather than on the slick and mean streets of the dark city. The noise and fury of the urban centre is replaced by a great silence. Sunshine noir critiques modernity through the eyes of two groups: first, Indigenous Australia, historically nearly wiped out by the colonial project, and contemporarily, often separated from language, land, and even family (Grant, 2016); second, the working class and poor, historically identified merely as expendable bodies for the English (Keneally, 2012), and contemporarily as causalities of economic orthodoxy and class bigotry, living economically fragile lives on the periphery of the major cities, out of sight and mind of middle-class Australia.

Sunshine Noir, as the title suggests, uses the environment as a central motif. Unlike US and East Asian Noir, Australian noir is set most frequently in a rural or outback setting, and takes

place under an inescapable sun, rather than in the shadows. There is a fear and sense of foreboding in the natural environment that rarely exists in other global noirs. In reviewing Australian Western noir, *The Proposition* (2005) (with an outlaw gunslinger as protagonist), Roger Ebert makes the following observation:

> There is the sense [in Australian films] that spaces there are too empty to admit human content. There are times in "The Proposition" when you think the characters might abandon their human concerns and simply flee from the land itself. (Ebert, 2006)

In Sunshine Noir, the land is almost always presented as a hostile, barren, and pitiless place: in its vastness, a great silence.

The exception is when the protagonist is Indigenous, as with Jay Swan (played by Aaron Pederson), a cop returning to his land in the neo-noir movie *Goldstone* (2016); or Blackie, a recently-released criminal also returning to his land in Paul Collis' novel, *Dancing Home* (2017). These characters are connected to and in communion with the land. For them, the existential horror comes not from the land, but from their knowledge of what the land once was, and their horror at what has been lost.

Australia in Asia

The question of whether Australia should be included in 'Asian modernity' is not without debate. Australia is geographically located at the bottom tip of Southeast Asia, and is economically integrated into the region. China and Japan are Australia's two biggest trading partners, Korea is fourth, India seventh, Singapore eighth and Thailand ninth (DFAT, 2018). But despite these facts, Australia is not an Asian country. As Paul Keating argued: "Australia is not and can never be an Asian nation any more than we can — or want to be — European or North American or African. We can only be Australian and can only relate to our friends and neighbours as Australian" (Keating, 1995).

However, it is a country located in the Asia-Pacific, whose present is bound up with Asia's and whose future will be ever firmly enmeshed in the region. As shadow foreign minister, Penny Wong, has argued: "Our future, and our future prosperity, is inevitably in Asia" (P. Wong, 2017). Australia is not an Asian country, but it would be hopelessly reductionist to argue it therefore shares no part of Asian modernity. Australia is of this region, sharing in its economy, its history and its future.

Defining an Australian Noir

While numerous scholarly articles and texts have been devoted to defining global noir, and some of its national manifestations (Fay & Nieland, 2009; Lovatt, 2015; Naremore, 2008; Shin & Gallagher, 2015; Teo, 2014), there have been limited attempts to define the Australian form. One of the few examples is that of US scholar Andrew Spicer, who in the introduction of his seminal *Film Noir* uses the following quote from *Goodbye Paradise* (1983):

> The winter sun was going down on Surfers Paradise. It was my ninety-eight day on the wagon and it didn't feel any better than the ninety-seventh. I missed my hip flask of Johnny Walker, my ex-wife Jean, my pet dog Somare and my exorbitant salary as Deputy Commissioner of Police. I wasn't sure any more I was cut out to be a writer of controversial exposes of police corruption. At the moment I couldn't lift the lid off a can of beans. I wanted to be twelve years old again and the best spin bowler in Southport High. I wanted a lot of things…So did my landlady, including the rent. (Spicer, 2002, p. 1)

This is a curious example. Spicer has selected a passage that deliberately apes the style and tone of Raymond Chandler, presumably as a way of showing the connection with classic American noir. As Spicer argues: "But for the reference to cricket, it may have come from a 1940s American noir" (Spicer, 2002, p. 2). True. The problem, however, is that the passage is not representative of Australian noir.

Spicer's invocation of Chandler is notable, given the differences between him and the founder of hardboiled fiction, Dashiell Hammett. The reference to Raymond Chandler often tips the philosophical hand of the noir scholar or film critic, for whom the idea of protagonist as knight-errant forms part of noir. This essay refutes this definition. There are no knights-errant in noir, just broken people trying to act authentically in a corrupt and unjust world.

Certainly, Australian Noir shares many characteristics with the classic US form (characteristics, as outlined above, that are consistent across global noir). It is fatalistic, the protagonist is almost always in a state of alienation, the narrative deals with corruption and power – be it state, corporation, or criminal enterprise (and the intermingling of these three) – and it critiques modernity. What distinguishes Sunshine Noir – both in film and literature – are three aspects: its social realism; its focus on class; and the depiction of the natural environment. I will discuss the first two of these elements via the works of David Michôd, perhaps the most influential contemporary Australian director of noir cinema.

Social Realism

The films and novels of Australian noir almost always conform to a social realist template. By social realist, I mean creative products that draw attention to the everyday conditions of the working classes and the poor, and are critical of the social structures that maintain these conditions (Lay, 2002). The social realism of Sunshine Noir focusses on the criminal class – depicted as a subset of the working class or poor – or on Indigenous Australia. The examples used by this essay do not include passages like the one quoted by Spicer, because such are rare in Sunshine Noir.

More commonly, Australian noir is closer to the unremittingly bleak vision of David Michôd, and his twin neo-noir films *The Rover* (2014) and *Animal Kingdom* (2010). As Andrew Nette notes:

> Michôd's characters, whether they dwell in a dystopian outback future or underworld Melbourne, do not face consequences in a formal or legalistic sense. The only sanction is what the most powerful or violent among them is capable of dishing out. (Nette, 2014)

Michôd's work is Hobbesian, in so far as it envisages a war of all against all, where the lives of Australia's underclass are nasty, brutish, and short. In *The Rover* – set in the near-future, in the inhospitable Australian outback – the following exchange occurs between the protagonist Eric (Guy Pearce) and a soldier, who has captured Eric and is preparing the paperwork to send him to Sydney. The scene is one of the most hard-hitting in the movie:

> **Eric:** …*I murdered my wife. I followed her to a man's house and watched him put his fingers inside her and I killed them both. No-one ever came after me. Ten years ago. I never had to explain myself. Never had to lie to anyone, I never had to run and hide. I just buried them in a hole and went home. No-one ever came after me. That hurt me more than getting my heart broken. Knowing it didn't matter. Knowing you could do*

something like that, no-one comes after ya. You do a thing like I did, it should really mean something. But it just doesn't matter anymore.

Soldier: *Well Champ. The thing you did in abo town is the one thing that does matter to us. Now you can do all the lying and confessing you like.*

Eric: *What feeling do you have when you wake up in the morning? When your feet touch the floor? Or before that, when you're lying there thinking about your feet hitting the floor. What does that feel like for you? Do you know what I'm talking about?*

Soldier: *No mate I don't.*

There is no room for the wit and élan of Raymond Chandler in this moral desert. This exchange reflects another element of Sunshine Noir, consistently explored: the violence of the male psyche, when pushed to extremis in the outback, the underworld, or the sporting contest (Blauvelt, 2014).

At the finale of *The Rover,* we finally see what is in the boot of Eric's stolen car. He has spent the whole movie desperately trying to retrieve it, killing numerous people in the process – indeed, 'what's in the boot' is the mystery driving the narrative. In the end, it turns out to be his dead dog. There is an existential chasm at the heart of Eric's character, an anguish over a lack of justice in the world – an injustice of which he is part. The feeling, before his feet touch the floor, is the feeling of being someone else, or, at the least, the feeling he could be anyone. In the haze that comes just after waking up, he forgets all of his sins, remembers all of his possibilities. Then his feet touch the hard floor of reality, and he can be only who he is. A man who killed his wife, in an indifferent world. Who only wants to bury a dead dog.

Michôd's *Animal Kingdom* (the title itself telling us everything we need to know about the criminal underworld), is a movie with limited dialogue from the protagonist – he grunts his way through most of the movie – and almost nothing in the way of speeches. A rare

exception is when one of the only good cops (Leckie, again played by Guy Pearce), explains how the world works to the laconic teenage protagonist, J:

> ***Leckie****: You know what the bush is about? It's about massive trees that have been standing there for thousands of years, and bugs that'll be dead before the minute's out. It's big trees and pissy little bugs. And everything knows its place in the scheme of things. Everything sits in the order somewhere. Things survive because they're strong, and everything reaches an understanding… You may think, because of the circles you move in or whatever, that you're one of the strong creatures, but you're not … they're not the strong anymore, and they're certainly not able to protect you … And you're in danger. Don't be confused about that. I think you know. And I think you know that I can help you. But I can't keep offering. You've gotta decide. You've gotta work out where you fit.*
>
> ***J****: I don't know why you're telling me all of this.*
>
> ***Leckie:*** *Yes, you do.*

Later, the most vicious of J's gangster family, Pope (played by Ben Mendelsohn), kills J's girlfriend, thinking her a snitch (she isn't). As J is leaving protective custody Leckie recalls their earlier conversation, asking him: "*Have you figured out where you fit?"* J departs the police safehouse without saying anything, returns alone to his grandmother's home, and calmly shoots Pope in the head. His actions provide his answer to the question. *I'm the lion.*

The characters in *Animal Kingdom* and *The Rover* are almost all poor and working class. There is little differentiation between police and criminal: with few exceptions they are all corrupt and violent. There appears to be no way out of the binds these characters are in: the only way for J to escape his criminal family is to kill Pope. Leckie, the only good cop, is unable to overcome the corruption of his colleagues or the code of silence among the criminal class. The idea of escape from this claustrophobic economic and social context seems distant in *Animal Kingdom*, and non-existent in *The Rover*. These two films treat the milieu of the

underbelly as a given, and so irreducibly prevalent that explanations over the *why* are not even broached.

Peter Temple, in his seminal noir novel, the Miles Franklin Award-winning *The Broken Shore* (2005), does spend some time on this aspect. Woven into the background of the story are bourgeois gentrification, corrupt development, and the marginalisation of those unable to afford the newly-expensive land, eat in the trendy cafes, or shop in the boutique stores. Temple notes the dying out of old towns as the labour associated with the inhabitants is made superfluous – he uses the example of truckies, who had:

> bought their blocks when land was cheap, fuel was cheap, freight rates were good and they were young and paunchless. Now they couldn't see their pricks without a mirror, the trucks sucked fifty-dollars notes, the freight companies screwed them till they had to drive six days, sometimes seven, to make the repayments. (Temple, 2005, pp. 36 - 37)

Communities become alienated as the creative destruction of capitalism transforms the familiar, making citizens foreigners to their own land and neighbourhoods. Apropos to this theme, *The Broken Shore* is concerned with more than class: it also delves into the marginalisation of Indigenous communities, and their treatment by the state (King, 2014). The elements of class, corruption, and Indigenous oppression come crashing together when three young Aboriginal men are falsely accused of murdering the town's wealthiest citizen. The boys are later killed by racist police; their deaths are made to look accidental. The protagonist, detective Joe Cashin, argues about the case with a homeless man he has let live on his property:

> Cashin felt the flash. 'I've had a bit more practice making judgements than your average swaggie,' he said and regretted his policeman's voice.

> ‘I’m an itinerant labourer,’ said Rebb, not looking at him. ‘People pay me to do jobs they don’t want to do themselves. Like the state pays you to keep property safe for the rich. The rich call, you come with the siren going. The poor call, well hang on, there’s a waiting list, we’ll get around to it some time.’
> ‘Bullshit,’ said Cashin. ‘Bullshit. You’ve got no fucking idea what you’re talking about…’
> ‘Those dead boys,’ said Rebb. ‘That the judgement you talking about?’ (Temple, 2005, p. 216)

Fay and Nieland argue American classic noir was structured around the twin concerns of race and class: “And these traumas of class conflict and racial violence chaotically repeat across the landscape of the twentieth century” (Fay & Nieland, 2009, p. 141). These traumas have indeed repeated in Australian noir, though in a far grittier and bleaker manner. In sunshine noir these characters move through futile lives, sweat-soaked, into the predestination of their economic and social exclusion. Though the Indigenous boys may later be exonerated, they’re not about to rise from the dead. In *Animal Kingdom*, J remains a murderer. In *The Rover*, Eric, who murdered his wife and her lover, escapes the police, buries his dog, and walks out into the rest of his life.

A Great Silence

Sue Matheson argues that in noir, the wilderness without represents the wilderness within (Matheson, 2005). Imogen Sara Smith, in her essay, In 'Lonely Places: Film Noir Outside the City', echoes this line of thought:

> Cities and towns, society itself, may be corrupt, but there's no survival outside them. In film noir the desert represents the ultimate extremity, the place where city dwellers come face to face with the raw facts of human nature. (Smith, 2009).

And, furthermore:

> [US cinema] found a sculpted beauty in the stark, arid landscape of the American Southwest, a hard country fiercely loved by its settlers for its pure air, space and freedom. Film noir [on the other hand] offered something closer to Eliot's 'The Wasteland', which uses a sterile, poisoned country to symbolize spiritual emptiness … away from law and authorities all power resides in violence and the willingness to use it. (Ibid.)

These arguments are both made by American scholars discussing US films noirs – I could find no comparable texts or quotes regarding the Australian form. While I agree with these arguments about the wilderness in US noir, I argue Sunshine Noir goes beyond it in the hostility of the environment, and the psychological breakdown of the characters trapped by it.

The extreme nature of the Australian landscape reflects the internal desolation of the protagonist. This is epitomised by the bleak Western Noir, *The Proposition*. The film opens with Englishman Captain Stanley (played by Ray Winston) looking out at the imposing landscape. He says: *"I will civilise this land."* Set in the remote Australian outback in the 1880s, it is a line he is to repeat, with increasing desperation as the narrative progresses, and one (deliberately, one assumes) reminiscent of the *mission civilisatrice* (or civilising mission) of colonial expansion. We discover that it is not the land itself that needs civilising, but the

foreigners who dwell on it: the barbarous criminals; the captain's fellow police, who are violent to a man; and the townspeople – insular, suspicious, and thirsting for the blood of the criminals. Those who fear the land become poisoned by that fear; or, perhaps more accurately, the land strips bare the reality of their natures, exposing the worst in each of them. As Stanley also says: *"Australia. What fresh hell is this?"*

Yet, paradoxically, those who embrace the land become worse. The life of Captain Stanley, desperately trying to hold on to his concept of civilisation with a neat garden, white picket fence, and eggs for breakfast cooked by his wife, is juxtaposed with the man who 'goes wild': Arthur Burns. Arthur is the head of the gang Stanley is hunting and the most violent of all of them. He now lives in the outback, feared by even the local indigenous people, who call him 'dog man'.

The dog man knows poetry, recites it, speaks movingly of life and love. He is transfixed by the wide brown land, staring out at it, a look of revelation on his face. The great silence, calming the psychopath within – Arthur says to another gang member, as he watches the sunset:

> *You can never get your fill of nature, Samuel. To be surrounded by it is to be stilled. It salves the heart. The mountains, the trees, the endless plains. The moon, the myriad of stars. Every man can be made quiet and complete. Even the lowliest misanthrope or the wretchedest sinners.*

And Jellon Lamb, a bigoted, anti-Irish bounty hunter played be the late and great John Hurt, says of Arthur:

> *Oh, he sits up there in those melancholy hills; some say he sleeps in caves like a beast, slumbers deep like the Kraken. The blacks say that he is a spirit. The troopers will never catch him. Common force is meaningless, Mr. Murphy, as he squats up there on his impregnable perch.*

The Proposition puts forward the argument that this man, this remorseless killer, *is the land*. The land is metaphor for his character.

An important exception to the depiction of the hostility and oppressive silence of the land is found in Indigenous noir, in which this relationship is reversed. The alienation, for the indigenous character, comes from the built environment imposed on the landscape (in *Dancing Home*), or from the exploitation of the land by mining companies (in *Goldstone*). Indeed, for *Goldstone* (2016), the mining company is a constant impediment to indigenous association with the land, to the extent that it has even corrupted the local land council, paying off all the elders.

Set in the present day, the 'civilisation' depicted in *Goldstone* is just a few demountables at the edge of a vast mining operation. The occasional signs hammered into the dust no longer signify. In the world of *Goldstone* 'police', or 'no drinking', or speed limits have no meaning. The place is marinated in alcohol, and the police are treated (and act) as glorified security guards. The miners are not charged for petty crimes such as assault and drunkenness, and major crimes – people trafficking, bribery, corruption, violation of environmental laws – are simply not investigated.

This brings to mind the much-quoted phrase from the leader of the Zapatista revolutionary leader, Sub-comandante Marcos:

> In the cabaret of globalization, the state performs a strip-tease, at the end of which it is left wearing the minimum necessary: its powers of repression. With its material base destroyed, its sovereignty and independence annulled, its political class effaced, the nation-state becomes a mere security service for the mega-companies. (Marcos, 1997)

When indigenous cop Jay Swan turns up, investigating the disappearance of an Asian tourist in the aptly named Furnace Creek (a tourist who we soon discover was actually a sex worker flown in by the company), he threatens the status quo. As a mine executive says to him:

> *You represent the Crown? So do we – this place would not exist without us. The difference is that we keep this country in business. See, it's all about standards of living, you know? We can't stop the wheel turning for anyone, including you.*

Goldstone is reminiscent of Dashiell Hammett's trenchant critique of capitalism in his novella *Nightmare Town* (1924). In this, the entire system is corrupt, every person at every level. Hammett uses the rather improbable scenario of a town collectively willing to conspire to make prohibition-era alcohol for an East Coast crime syndicate. Worse, they lure people to town for work, kill them, and take their identities, planning to later burn down the town and claim the insurance.

Preposterous, but the metaphor is powerful: that of a town built on nothing but greed and, once the greed has been sated, merely a built environment to be burned down and forgotten: a perfect analogy for the large mining company that inhabits *Goldstone.* Everyone who runs a business is dependent on the miners, and therefore is corrupted; the place only exists by dint of the mining industry, and once the minerals are exhausted, this temporary township will disappear. It is a perfect modern example of the *Nightmare Town* scenario, with one exception: in *Goldstone* we know the land isn't simply a barren, forgotten place, but a spiritual centre for the indigenous population living there.

One of the few elements that cannot be controlled by the mining industry is the indigenous elder, Jimmy (played by David Gulpilil). The one holdout on the land council, he has stopped further expansion of the mine. He does not drink, he is one of the few who does not attend church, and he refuses to accept bribes from the mining company. In this sense, he is beyond

the reach of modernity. Yet Jimmy is not beyond the reach of violence, an intrinsic element of the noir cosmology. Jimmy is murdered – tragically, by another elder at the behest of the mining company. As a final insult, Jimmy is buried by the church, an institution he didn't believe in.

This thoroughgoing corruption is also signified by the landscape. Several times throughout *Goldstone*, the characters talk of the 'dust' of the land settling on them, like a stain. For example, the exchange between police officer, Josh, and the indigenous elder, Tommy, when the latter comes forward to confess the murder of Jimmy:

> Josh: *"Tommy. Tommy. You all right? What do you want to do, Tommy?"*
>
> Tommy: *"I want to clean the dust away."*

Later, Josh tells detective Swan that he never did enough to stop the corruption: "I'm going to put in for a transfer. Somewhere by the ocean. Need to clean a bit of this dust out of me, Jay."

Jay, on the other hand, has returned to his home country. Troubled by traumatic experiences as a homicide detective, now borderline alcoholic, he finds solace and place in the land. Superficially, he experiences the same peace as Arthur Burns: salve to a troubled soul. But the lessons Jay Swan learns are the opposite: not of an arbitrary brutality, but rather of connection and belonging.

In Paul Collis' debut novel – and winner of the David Unaipon Award – *Dancing Home* (2017), Blackie looks at the landscape from the same place as Swan, but comes to a very different conclusion:

> No ceremonial earth dances take place at the top of the mountain now. The old dancers left that place of dreaming when the white people came through with gun, cutlass, and the Bible… Forgotten by many, that beautiful place now cries alone all night long for

> her dancers to come back and step softly, to sing to the old mother earth. She waits there, scarred and bleeding – waiting to be admired again by her children, waiting once again to be the centre of the world.
>
> A pine forest, planted on the side of the road. All the trees shiver when the wind blows. The pines cry too. They sob like stolen children did when the boss came for them – them pines. They tremble when the chainsaw begins to rip through their brother's trunks, they shiver and tremble each time they hear a truck coming, thinking it might be coming to take them (Collis, 2017, pp. 30 - 31)

No oppressive silence, nor a communion, but rather the cries of destruction, a lamentation for what has been lost. The land speaks the language of dispossession for those able to hear it.

Outside the indigenous perspective of *Dancing Home* and *Goldstone*, the environment oppresses. David Michôd's *The Rover*, depicts a Mad Max-ian wasteland, where the land itself is reclaiming the continent, subsuming what is left of the built environment. Almost every scene is in the stark sunlight, the characters looking for respite from its harshness. The protagonist Eric, like the environment, is spare in his words, desolate in his outlook, and merciless in his actions.

In *The Broken Shore,* a key plot point for both the detective protagonist and the mystery he is trying to solve is 'The Kettle', a section of the surging, violent sea out from a point of land at the heart of the broken shore. A known suicide spot, it is here the protagonist's father committed suicide, and it is from here that an indigenous boy is thrown to make it look like suicide. Here, where one submits to the raw power of the Australian environment, is where one dies. The Kettle is described as follows:

> the huge sea, the grey-green water skeined with foam, sliding, falling, surging, full of little peaks and breaks, hollows and rolls, the sense of unimaginable power beneath the surface, terrible forces that could lift you up and suck you down and spin you (Temple, 2005, p. 164)

In the description of the ocean in *The Broken Shore*, in the reference to the criminal in *The Proposition* as the Kraken, and consistently in the way it is depicted on screen and on page throughout Sunshine Noir, the land is leviathan: a creature of vast and unimaginable power, a creature barely aware of the individuals that dwell upon it, fleas on the back of the beast. When the leviathan sleeps there is a great silence, pressing down on those without the ears to hear the language of the land and sea. When roused, the leviathan – through heat, through flood, through the crushing ocean depths, through its arid eternal plains – destroys the good and the wicked alike.

Defining an Australian Noir (II)

The example used by Andrew Spicer is not representative of the Australian form: Sunshine Noir is not merely a Chandleresque sampling, with a dash of cricket. Rather, it is a distinct national imagining, emerging from the local context, which nonetheless shares several key characteristics with global noir.

Andrew Spicer argues:

> The presence of film noir in Australia should not surprise us…film noir is the product of the uneven development of modernity as a global force, a critical category that casts doubt on the ability of capitalism to deliver just and humane solution (Spicer, 2002, p. 2).

He goes on to say, "national manifestations need to be carefully identified and delineated" (Spicer, 2002, p. 3). Finally, he states "this emphasis on the internationalism of film noir is part of the revisionist impulse that drives this collection" (Ibid.).

I agree with the two statements, and the final sentiment. However, Australia does not feature as a chapter in Spicer's text (though Latin American, India, parts of Europe, and South Korea do); the example used in the introduction is unrepresentative, and the "national manifestation" is neither defined nor delineated. In consequence, with respect to Australia, his discussion effects a restatement of US hegemony over the form, obeying the 'hegemonic impulse', as Stephen Teo puts it (Teo, 2014), to refer national noirs back to the US, rather than the global currents of modernity that create and shape them.

In Spicer's defence, even this essay cannot shrug the hegemonic impulse, as the ideas contained within are communicated via the lingua franca of the noir experience; the lingua franca of the biggest movies, the most influential books, so many of which emerged from the US and so helped to shape popular understanding of the form. Key, here, is an awareness of

this impulse, and the constant drive to delineate and identify national noirs first on their own terms, and second within the global context of modernity.

Conclusion

Australian noir concerns itself with the underdog, most particularly the poor and working class, and indigenous Australians. These are modernity's casualties, both historically and today. The underdog has always been central to Australian art, and sporting culture, and mythology. However, there is no idealisation of the underdog in Sunshine Noir, no tales of the noble battler, fighting honourably against the British or the system, righting wrongs. While there is a stronger identification with the criminal class in Australian noir than other global forms, and nuance in telling the stories of the working class and indigenous Australia, the form is unsentimental. These are not redemption tales.

Sunshine Noir bathes a corrupt world in its bright shining light. The light does not purify, but rather picks out, unflinchingly, every detail, every flaw, every ugliness. Noir that hides in the shadows can afford to be aesthetically pleasing. It can be stylish, even attractive. In Sunshine Noir the only beauty is in the land; and it is a terrible, despairing beauty. The land is leviathan; omnipresent, indifferent, cruel, and inescapable. The great silence of the Australian outback, of the sun-flattened empty streets of the suburbs, is the silence of the Australian soul. It is the desolation of the marginalised: an existential emptiness springing from a loss of identity and place, from the loneliness of standing against a corrupt system, or from an unjust world that has long left them behind.

Chapter Six – Vietnam

Apocalypse Noir: An Impossible History

Introduction

In the decades following the American War, the literature of Vietnam was the literature of trauma (Ha, 2016). The most critically-acclaimed and widely-read works were those that dealt with the impossible history of the wars to end French colonialism and American neo-colonialism. The term *impossible history* has a double meaning in this chapter. The first is obvious: that of a poor, developing nation toppling the last vestiges of the French empire, and afterwards defeating the new, bright and shining empire of the United States at the peak of its power. The second meaning is more nebulous: the impossible personal experiences of veterans and refugees in an apocalyptic war with America. Of three million dead and more wounded in decades of brutal combat; of families, North and South, torn asunder. The impossible trauma carried within these refugees and veterans, sometimes so acute it could not be remembered, amnesia striking those with dark histories too painful even to recall.

Vietnamese literature is not normally associated with noir, and to date no scholarly article has been written that specifically connects a portion of its national literature to the noir form. This is, in part, because the general scholarship on Vietnamese literature, in the West, is scant, and

in part because the connections are not immediately obvious. As I will argue, the noir tradition here is not as explicit as in Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia, where the authors and film-makers were aware of the noir tradition, adapting, fusing it (and sometimes disregarding it) when they created their local manifestations of the form. In this sense, the linkages with Vietnamese literature are subtler. Yet they are certainly there.

The stories I have selected, of Vietnamese veterans and refugees, are linked to noir in several ways. The 'shell-shock cinema' of the post-First and Second World Wars was a formative influence on classic noir (Kaes, 2009), as was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) central to several neo-noir films focussed on US Veterans of the war in Vietnam. The post-war literature of trauma in Vietnam shares many of these characteristics. A second connection is the fragmented narrative of the chosen stories, which is typical of film noir and noir literature (Horsley, 2001). The third is the questioning of modernity – in this case both of modern warfare, and of the 'modern' society the Vietnamese regime sought to impose in the post-war period. The fourth is the focus on the corruption of powerful regimes – be it the Americans, the South Vietnamese puppet government, or the North Vietnamese communists – and the corrosive effect of this on the integrity of the individual, and especially on their capacity to express love. The fifth is the doomed plight of the veteran or refugee, never to overcome the trauma of the war, or to escape the impossible history warring in their minds. The last is the alienation of the protagonist, frequently reflected in the hostility of the land and of the environment.

Given that this will be the first academic essay written in English to argue post-war Vietnamese literature significantly overlaps with the noir tradition, I will be stepping into new and controversial territory. I see this, therefore, as a preliminary attempt to open up a new avenue of scholarly investigation into an underexplored national literature.

Three Novels: The Sorrow of War, Memories of a Pure Spring, Dragonfish

The literature chosen for this chapter is limited by my inability to read fluently in Vietnamese. This will always lead to questions about how representative are the works chosen, and about the filtering effect of Western publishers. This potential bias is only intensified by the fact that few Vietnamese works are available in translation (Ha, 2016). During my interview with Duc Qui Nguyen – a Vietnamese poet, artist, and translator – in Hanoi, we discussed some of the many writers, particularly in the South, who had never been translated: Hoang Hai Thuy, for example, a popular crime writer through the 1960s until the end of the war in 1975, whose work may have yielded crucial information for this essay (D. Q. Nguyen, 2019).

However, two of the three texts chosen for this chapter are critically-acclaimed and widely read in Vietnam. *The Sorrow of War* (1990/1996), by Bao Ninh, is one of Vietnam's most popular novels of all time (Dinh, 1996; Riding, 2005); and *Memories of a Pure Spring* (1996) by *Duong Thu Huong*, is one of Vietnam's most popular novelists of all time (Ha, 2016; Hergenhan, 2007). Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong both served in the American war. Duong was a singer in a troupe of entertainers who travelled throughout the country, entertaining soldiers on the front lines. Bao Ninh served in the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade; of the five hundred who went to war in 1969, only ten survived (Bao, 1990/1996).

The Sorrow of War tells the story of Kien, a broken veteran who writes about his experiences in the war in order to come to terms with them. The structure of the novel is fractured, jumping backward and forward in time from Kien's youthful pre-war idealism, to the blood-soaked fever dream of his ten years on the battlefield, to the present day as a shattered, mentally-ill writer. *The Sorrow of War* is, first and foremost, a novel of trauma. The experience of PTSD for the story's protagonist is largely recognisable to the Western reader –

the insomnia, anxiety, nightmares, outbursts of violence – yet one, central aspect of the trauma will be deeply unfamiliar: ghosts. The protagonist of *The Sorrow of War* is haunted, literally, by the spirits of dead comrades. This aspect, as I will later discuss, is crucial to the Vietnamese cosmology, and such hauntings, by those who have died far from their ancestral homes, appear time and again in all three novels discussed in this chapter.

Sorrow opens with a rainy season that has gone on too long. Kien lies in a hammock in the back of a truck, the tarpaulin above is torn, water drip-dripping on him. He lies suspended over dozens of bodies, recovered by him and his companion as part of MIA collection unit after the end of the American War. The macabre duty takes place in the 'Jungle of Screaming Souls' – the area where most of Kien's battalion was wiped out. This oppressive climate permeates the entire narrative – whether through unending rain or blistering heat. So too does Kien's duty: he starts by literally picking up the pieces of fallen comrades, and proceeds in this manner for the rest of his post-war life, trying to try to recover the pieces of his memories and the memories of the fallen. As Madeline Thein argues: "the reader experiences just how many lives Bao Ninh can bequeath to us through the single, solitary mind of Kien," (Thien, 2012).

The Sorrow of War was ground-breaking because of this depiction of the veteran. Until the publication of the novel, American suffering had been imagined as exceptional. As Dana Healy puts it, "the trauma of war has been resolutely claimed by the Americans as theirs alone" (Healy, 2010, p. 326). *Sorrow* destroys the stereotype put forward by the Vietnamese Government and the US entertainment industry of the Vietnamese as a stoic, self-sacrificing, resolute foe; automatons fighting various imperialist invaders. As Bao Ninh said during an interview with an American veteran, several decades after the war: "We were human beings. That is what you must tell people. We were human beings" (Thien, 2012).

Memories of a Pure Spring tells the tragic story of married couple and artists, Hung and Suong, who serve Vietnam faithfully during the War, only to be betrayed in its aftermath. Like *The Sorrow of War*, *Memories* uses a non-linear narrative structure, which, as I will later discuss, is a common noir technique utilised to express a traumatised psyche. After the end of the American War, Hung is removed from his post as head of an artistic troupe by a petty bureaucrat. The troupe had travelled around the countryside, performing for Vietnamese soldiers in order to lift morale; their slogan was "our songs are louder than the bombing" (Riding, 2005). Hung becomes despondent, starts drinking heavily, and accidentally becomes associated with people smugglers (he passes out on a beach while a group of refugees nearby are preparing to launch a boat). He is sent to a re-education camp, where he is starved and brutalised. Hung is finally allowed to return home after his wife, Suong – known as 'the nightingale with the crystal voice' – performs for the officers who run the camp. No longer entitled to a state pension, Hung spends all his wife's money on a debauched lifestyle. He takes opium, immediately gets addicted, and sleeps with a prostitute while high. While this is his only indiscretion during his entire marriage, Hung gets a virulent form of syphilis that renders him unable to have children. During all of this, Suong has been wooed by the commander of the re-education camp where Hung was interred, and is having an affair. At the end of the novel, Hung attends a performance of the works he composed during the war, put on by a sympathetic friend who wishes to rehabilitate Hung's reputation. Hung leaves halfway through the performance, goes home, and kills himself.

As may be gathered, *Memories* is not an uplifting affair. There is sense of exploitation throughout, especially of Suong; and alienation, especially Hung's. Rain is omnipresent throughout the story, as is the corruption of the government, unchecked in all walks of life, from the serious to the banal to the petty. As noted in a review in the *New York Times*: "Each

life unfolds and creates a graveyard for its own hopes and aspirations, whether modest or grandiose" (Gambone, 2000).

Doi Moi (renovation) was Vietnam's reform period – beginning in 1986 – of opening up economically and politically (Gustafsson, 2008; Healy, 2013); *Doi Moi* followed a long period of censorship. From the outset of war and revolution in Vietnam, first against the French in the late 1930s, through the insurgencies against Japan, the French again, and finally the United States, restrictions on artistic expression had steadily grown (Dinh, 1996; Grossheim, 2006; Healy, 2010). Thus, the popularity of Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong's work must be understood in the context of a political system that only allowed representations of Vietnamese soldiers as patriotic and stoic. Ironically, the propaganda of the regime was not a long way from the image of the remorseless black-clad Viet Cong popularised by Hollywood. As Ha Quan Manh argues:

> If one were to study the wartime corpus of literature without some background knowledge of its historical and political context, one might mistakenly conclude that the Vietnamese did not suffer excessive loss and pain during the war, because the war was romanticized in the literature, as a propagandistic expedient to invigorate the people in their struggle. (Ha, 2016, p. 464)

Dana Healy believes *The Sorrow of War* was a paradigm shift,

> the first North Vietnamese fictional work to de-glorify the war in Vietnam. Its treatment of the war illustrates the new approach increasingly adopted by other writers and filmmakers. By removing the conflict from the paradigms of ideology and collectivism…Bao Ninh was able to reclaim the war as a personal trauma and elucidate its brutality through individual experiences… the novel mounted an effective challenge to the established official canon of war literature and cinema in Vietnam. (Healy, 2010, p. 344)

While Bao Ninh's novel was briefly banned by the regime, this decision was soon reversed. The book is widely available and read, even today. He still lives in the city of his birth, Hanoi. He never wrote another novel. In my interview with Duc Qui Nguyen, he said, of his friend Bao Ninh: "Five hundred people died for his first novel [a reference to the soldiers in Bao Ninh's brigade], how could he write another?" (D. Q. Nguyen, 2019).

Duong Thu Huong does not live in Vietnam. Herself a former member of the Communist Party, Duong began to criticise the government directly in the years following the American War, and was jailed for several months as a consequence. Her works, which had been best-sellers, were banned after the publication of her third novel – *Paradise of the Blind* (PEN, 2019). Ha Quan Manh argues that Duong "is a maverick whose fiction is a polemical counterblast to the ugly realities camouflaged under socialist idealism" (Ha, 2016, p. 473). *Memories of a Pure Spring* was written in Vietnamese and sent abroad to be published. It has never been available in Vietnam. She moved to Paris in 2006, where she still lives in exile.

There is, as such, a strong argument for Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong to be understood as writers who can ably and credibly represents the trauma of the American War, and its aftermath. The third text, however, is more problematic.

Dragonfish, a neo-noir novel by Vu Tran, is set in the United States (Las Vegas), and written by an American citizen. The protagonist is Robert Ruen, an Oakland cop who has never come to terms with his wife leaving him, two years before. His ex is Suzy, a Vietnamese-American woman (her true name is Hong Thi Pham) who arrived in the US as a refugee after the end of the Vietnam War. She fled the South after her husband had spent several years in a re-education camp, an experience that led to his early death. Suzy is traumatised by the experience, and much like *The Sorrow of War*, *Dragonfish* is a story about PTSD, and the particular Vietnamese cosmology that includes ghosts and visions as part of the aftermath of

trauma. Unlike *The Sorrow of War,* however, Tran's novel is a story of PTSD once removed, as it is told primarily from the perspective of Robert, who sees the symptoms of his wife's suffering – anger, long periods of silence, unaccountable rage, and finally, disappearances in the middle of the night – and remains impotent to do anything for her or her pain.

Inclusion of *Dragonfish* in this chapter would seem to contradict one of the ethical and normative principles underlying this essay: the conscious rejection of US hegemony over the form. On this point, Ha Quan Manh argues:

> In the United States, although discourse on Vietnamese War literature in the last two decades has attempted to include both the American perspective and the Vietnamese American perspective, the transnational discourse remains incomplete and even biased, as the voice and presence of the Vietnamese nationals have not yet received enough serious consideration. (Ha, 2016, p. 469)

Ha further argues that Vietnamese-American authors are often from privileged backgrounds, educated in the West, and cannot represent the 'subaltern' voice of Vietnam (Ibid.). Finally, he believes there has been a tendency among these writers of "romanticising South Vietnam before the war ended, supporting US involvement in Vietnamese politics, and dehumanising the communists and soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army" (Ha, 2016, p. 470).

Viet Nguyen, on the other hand, believes Vietnamese-Americans have a role to play in countering the hegemony of the Hollywood image:

> If screen memories from movies like Apocalypse Now or The Deer Hunter are what Americans remember, they are what I and many other Vietnamese Americans want to forget: peasants massacred on a boat, prisoners playing Russian roulette with the Viet Cong. The new and defiant refrain among some young Vietnamese Americans is that Viet Nam is the name of a country, not a war. (V. T. Nguyen, 2006, p. 13)

The machine memory of Hollywood is invidious not only because it can embody collective national – and even global – memories of a war, but can also infiltrate even the memories of those who experienced first-hand the brutalities of the conflict:

> I think my concepts of what constitutes memory have changed over the years, from thinking of memory as something concrete to something so malleable. But the one concept I still hold on to is that, because Hollywood and the US media are constantly trying to displace and destroy our memories about the Vietnam War to replace it with their version, I must keep fighting to keep the meanings of these memories alive (V. T. Nguyen, 2006, p. 24)

Nguyen also makes an argument that very closely resembles those previously made about Hong Kong: "Because amnesia and memory are fraternal twins, what to forget and how to forget are also political and ethical choices" (V. T. Nguyen, 2006, p. 15).

This is the vexed territory of the American War: of hegemony and machine memory, and of the ethics of remembering. Thus the choices of this chapter are complicated ethical choices: they inherently result in a privileging of certain memories over others. Noir literature, as I have argued throughout this essay, is anti-hegemonic, thus it is crucial that the texts I have chosen are consistent with this argument. It is important to note that even Ha Quan Manh, so critical of the focus of academic and artistic texts on Vietnam, also says: "it is important to discuss the Vietnam War with an informed attitude of fairness towards both sides of the conflict in order to appreciate the human costs for each side" (Ha, 2016, p. 486).

I agree, completely, that there has been a privileging of American, and Vietnamese-American, narratives on Vietnam. America is the hegemonic centre of global cultural production, and its centrality in academic debates and popular culture is undeniable. However, it would seem arbitrary to discount a writer's work merely because they were forced to leave Vietnam. The approach of this chapter is consistent with Quan's imperative:

an informed attitude of fairness to both sides. Given the history of Vietnam in the 20th century, ignoring those who left as refugees would ignore one of the consequences of a century of war and colonialism: a vast diaspora.

Vu Tran was born in Saigon and lived there until the age of four (his father fought alongside the Americans) (Tran, 2016). He departed as a refugee, with his mother, and lived for several months in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Hoa Pham notes that PTSD is common among refugees, and, "The silence and the suffering endured in war and the boat journey is carried through to the next generation" (Pham, 2013, p. 21): a point previously raised in the chapter on Japan, where the children of Hiroshima victims suffered "inter-generational trauma". I would further argue that the description of the re-education camps after the war seems little different between *Dragonfish* and *Memories of a Pure Spring* – in the former, an officer in the army of the South dies soon after being released from the camps, his body and mind ruined by the experience; and the latter tells the story of Hung, a patriot from the north who led an artistic troupe in the warzone, but whose spirit is broken by the camp, rendering him unable to produce any more art. It was, thus, the fate of many, both north and south, to endure the indignities and suffering of post-war re-education camps.

Noir in general is a form heavily influenced by refugees and exiles. Jewish émigrés from Germany – such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger and Edward G Ulmer – were driven from Europe by Adolf Hitler in the 1930s and early 1940s (Brook, 2009). This experience of dislocation fed into the cynical, dark vision of these directors, which in turn produced some of the classic films noir, such as *Sunset Boulevard (1950)*, *Double Indemnity (1944)*, and the *Big Heat (1953)*.

Vu Tran states:

> *Dragonfish* employs the tropes of the crime novel and the noir novel—two genres that revolve around the endless permutations and consequences of violence—to dramatize how the violence of war moves far beyond the battlefield in time and place, how it seeps into the ongoing lives of its victims and can make criminals and refugees of us all. (Tran, 2019)

The refugee experience is one of trauma and exile. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues: "over and over, Vietnamese-American literature shows the war's traumatic effect on civilians and refugees…[and] its haunting presence in the diaspora's second generation" (V. T. Nguyen, 2017). In this manner, *Dragonfish* conveys the enduring trauma of the refugee, the psychological dislocation and alienation caused by the experience that continues to manifest, even decades later. Thus, I have included *Dragonfish* in this analysis because it is inseparable from the Vietnamese experience, because it represents a broader picture of the aftermath of the war, and because it is explicitly tied to the noir form.

Veteran as a Noir Archetype

While Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong were not – as far as I am aware – consciously writing noir, nor were the first authors and directors of noir, given the term was not coined until 1946, nor widely used in the US until the 1970s. Thus, the seminal works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M Cain– *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), *The Big Sleep* (1939), and *Mildred Pierce* (1941), were never considered or called 'noir' until much later. The film adaptations of these novels – respectively in 1941, 1946, and 1945 – were also before the term was defined, and yet constitute what are generally considered classic works of film noir. To reiterate the argument I made in the opening chapter: noir is not a response to an idea or a movement within film theory; noir is a response to modernity. An earlier quote from Kyu Hyun Kim is worth repeating here: "film noir can be construed as part of the broader cultural response to modernity in the context of the twentieth-century history of global social change" (Kim, 2015, p. 110).

Modern warfare and colonialism are, as I have argued, are both key forces and consequences within modernity. The so-called 'modern', free, revolutionary state imagined by the regime of North Vietnam after the American War is something referred to with cynicism – even betrayal – by both Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong. The linkages between post-war trauma and noir are thus worth exploring, however briefly, to elucidate how warfare, in the context of twentieth-century global social and political change, was and is intrinsic to the development and evolution of the noir form.

Anton Kaes argues that the 'shell-shock cinema' of Weimar Germany was a response to the industrialised violence of World War I, and represents a post-traumatic and proto-noir period of film:

> Film noirs of the 1940s share with shell shock cinema of the 1920 a focus on psychologically troubled characters who have experienced something deeply disturbing in their past. The lost souls of Weimar cinema reappear in film noir as American soldiers returning from the war – shell-shocked, amnesiac, and prone to violence. (Kaes, 2009, p. 214)

US films noir such as *High Wall* (1947), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), *The Crooked Way* (1949), *In a Lonely Place* (1950), and (in Japan) Akira Kurosawa's *Stray Dog* (1949), were all about veterans, in different ways, struggling to return to normalcy after the extreme experiences of warfare (Svetov, 2016). In *In a Lonely Place*, for example, Dixon Steele (played by Humphrey Bogart) is a screenwriter who has been unable to write anything since he returned from the war. He is prone to explosive acts of violence, at one point nearly beating a man to death after a minor altercation while driving. In *The Crooked Way*, the protagonist Eddie Rice (John Payne) is a veteran and war hero who received a head injury during combat, and who cannot recall anything of his former life when he returns to San Francisco. Little does Eddie know, he once was a gangster. Amnesia becomes a metaphor for the way war changes a soldier: the resemblance between the man from before, and the one who came back, being only skin deep.

These returning veterans find something lacking when they get back home – a loss of meaning in their lives. As Kien, the protagonist of *The Sorrow of War,* puts it:

> Some said they had been fighting for thirty years, if you included the Japanese and the French. He had been fighting for ten years. War had been their whole world. So many lives, so many fates. The end of fighting was like the deflation of an entire landscape, with fields, mountains, and rivers collapsing in on themselves (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 107).

Kien does not feel joy at the end of the war, then or in the annual celebrations afterwards. Rather, his heart, and the hearts of other veterans, "would ache with sadness" (Ibid.). More

than this, there is the sense in *Sorrow* and *Memories* that the ideas of nation, and unity, and shared progress were all lies. They were myths, propagated by a self-interested elite, in order to rally the people behind the cause, to bend them to their will.

The period following the American War also witnessed the trauma of returning US veterans, through films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Cutter's Way* (1981). *Taxi Driver*, considered to be "culturally, historically, or aesthetically" significant by the Library of Congress (LoC, 1994), is a classic neo-noir written by Paul Schrader, whose essay 'Notes on Film Noir' (1972) has been particularly influential among noir theorists and film-makers. PTSD is central to the plot, and the essence of the main character, Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro) a former US marine now working as a taxi driver in New York City. A depressed and paranoid insomniac, Bickle slowly descends into madness, spurred on by violent fantasies. Like Dixon Steele, Travis Bickle is prone to violent outbursts with little provocation. At the end of the film (after trying and failing to assassinate a US presidential candidate) Bickle goes on a 'righteous' shooting spree, killing a pimp, his bodyguard, and a mafioso.

In a particularly unsettling scene in *The Sorrow of War*, Kien nearly beats to death a leather-jacketed biker who says that Phuong (a woman Kien was deeply in love with before the war) is a slut, and that he (the biker) taught her "how to really enjoy screwing" (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 155). Kien, who up until that point had been quietly sipping his coffee, suddenly reacts:

> Kien moved on him, punching first, then crunching Leather Jacket's head with a chair. As he fell Kien grabbed him and violently shredded his clothes, pounding his head repeatedly on the floor. When Leather Jacket had had enough, Kien dragged him outside on the pavement. He was ramming Leather Jacket's bloody head into a sewer outlet when the police arrived and tried to pull him off (Ibid.).

Afterwards, the police let him go because they'd "seen enough of the veterans" (Ibid.).

There is a strong argument here for the inclusion of the veteran as a noir archetype. Appearing in US cinema (both the classic and neo-noir eras), again in Japan after the end of the Second World War, and in Vietnamese literature during the *Doi Moi* period, the veteran embodies many traits of the stereotypical noir protagonist. The veteran feels like an outsider, in some cases rejected by society, in others completely misunderstood. The 'permutations and consequences of violence', in the words of Vu Tran, have an enduring effect on the veteran, who is alienated not only from society, but from themselves: their sense of identity stripped away in the acts they witnessed, and committed, on the battlefield. The existential crisis of the veteran is the recursive crisis of noir: an individual faced with the absurdity of an era, and the arbitrariness of the human fate (in this case in the grim theatre of mechanised warfare). As quoted previously, the crisis of finding oneself, "in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates" (Matheson 2005). Meaning, in this case, is the meaning to be derived from remembering. And remembering, for the veteran or for the refugee, is itself a heroic and fraught act.

The trauma of the refugee is, in many ways, the trauma of the veteran – though it is more likely that the refugee is solely the victim of acts of violence, rather than a perpetrator as well. In *Dragonfish*, Suzy finds herself incapable of loving her daughter, who she brought with her when she fled Vietnam. The loss of Suzy's husband (in Vietnam) and the horrors of the journey by boat broke something within her. She believes she has, "been asleep all these years, ever since she left Vietnam" (Tran, 2015, p. 95). At one point, while they are waiting for their refugee applications to be processed on a small island off Malaysia, she sees her daughter (Mai) drowning. She does not save her, but rather, frozen, merely watches until another refugee jumps in the ocean and saves her child. Once her daughter is returned to her alive, Suzy bursts into tears; twenty years later, in a confessional letter to Mai, she writes:

> *But I was not thinking of you at all. I was crying for myself, for everything I had lost, for your father, your ridiculous father who would never hold me or forgive me anything again.* (Tran, 2015, p. 125)

Broken and alienated outsiders, the veteran lacks even the hired gun status of the Gunslinger, the Android, the Private Eye or the Samurai. The usefulness of the veteran has passed: once instruments of faceless generals, now adrift on the winds of time, purposeless. The last fight left for the veteran is the fight to tell truth to power. They cannot change a corrupt system; this does not even exist as a possibility. The last fight of the veteran in noir is to try (and often fail) to reclaim an impossible history, to reorganise a fractured narrative of trauma, and make peace with it. The last fight of the veteran is to say *we were human beings, and these things really happened.*

The Shape of Trauma

Traumatic experience produces narrative structures that are fractured and erratic, structures which will not sustain integrated notions of self, society, culture or world.

Jane Robinett – The Narrative Shape of Trauma

Noir literature and film are populated with traumatised characters; acute psychological states have always inhered in the noir cosmology. Fractured narratives have also been a hallmark of noir, as a means to represent this damaged psychology.

Drawing from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV*, Jane Robinett defines PTSD as:

> One in which the person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with an event or events that involve, 'actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity', or that of another person…in the face of these events, the person can neither escape nor resist effectively…Terror and helplessness overburden ordinary psychic defences, exploding the grounds of the belief systems on which we build, and with which we defend, our individual and collective identities. (Robinett, 2007, p. 293)

Trauma furthermore has a deleterious effect on memory, inhibiting the ability to recall the experience consciously (Wicks, 2014). Yet one of the hallmarks of PTSD is the *unwilling* recall of traumatic memories through flashbacks and nightmares. Amanda Wicks argues:

> memory also functions in the manner of a narrativizing tool by organizing and structuring events and experiences in order to provide the individual with a coherent sense of temporality. Trauma damages memory systems on both a theoretical (behavioural) and practical (biological) level, directly affecting the ability to recall and recount not only the traumatic event but also other memories not associated with the trauma. (Wicks, 2014, p. 332)

Much has been made of the resonances between *The Sorrow of War* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by the *New Yorker* magazine, *The Independent Newspaper*, and others in their reviews of *Sorrow* (Bao, 1990/1996). The thrust of these comparisons is that Remarque's novel gives anglophone readers a German perspective of the First World War, where *Sorrow* was the most influential account of the Vietnamese side of the American War. Jane Robinett goes further in her essay, arguing:

> The correspondence between the form of the experience these novels [*The Sorrow of War* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*] represent and the form of their narrative reveals a close correlation between the experiences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and narrative structure itself. (Robinett, 2007, p. 292)

Robinett further makes the point that "both Remarque and Bao Ninh make it clear that writing has played a role in recovery from trauma" (Robinett, 2007, p. 294).

However, I believe there is another seminal anti-war novel that can be aptly compared to Bao Ninh's, and one that my mind turned to time and again when I first read *The Sorrow of War*: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. In the latter, the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, has become 'unstuck in time', moving back and forwards though history – the central event of which is his witnessing the firebombing of Dresden – using the science-fictional conceit of time travel. In the trauma of the war, Billy loses his moorings in the present, and his capacity to experience linear time is broken. Amanda Wicks argues the device of time travel is used by Vonnegut to express an experience that lies "outside the bounds of normative human consciousness" (Wicks, 2014, p. 329). Wick argues that Vonnegut was suffering PTSD, and the artifice of time travel makes the novel more effective at communicating this trauma, "because it breaks with the attempt to transform an inconceivable experience into language that relays the comprehensible, and instead moves into the realm of unreality to accomplish the task of working through and narrating trauma" (Wicks, 2014, pp. 338 - 339). That is, the

psychology of trauma cannot be communicated via conventional means, and – to paraphrase Albert Camus – through an obvious lie, we may more easily arrive at a truth.

Kien, as both the writer and protagonist of his story, looks back on the manuscript he has worked on throughout the narrative and sees, "there was no chronological order at all. Any page seemed like the first, any page could have been the last" (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 229). Trauma has fractured his memories, and the idea of linear cause-and-effect is displaced by fevered, often unwelcome flashbacks and hallucinations. Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Kien has the ability to *choose* to travel to a pre-traumatic past: perhaps, in part, because the memories there are still whole and retrievable. Thus, through drugs, through dreams, and sometimes through conscious recall, Kien time-travels into his own history:

> My life seems little different from that of a sampan pushed upstream towards the past. The future lied to us, there long ago in the past. There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful prewar past.
>
> The tragedies of the war years have bequeathed to my soul the spiritual strength that allows me to escape the infinite present. The little trust and will to live that remains stems not from my illusions but from the power of my recall. (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 47)

Kien's only way of dealing with his trauma is this despairing nostalgia. By denying the present he may deny the trauma that destroyed him. For example, when he returns to his life with his teenage love, Phuong:

> Though they hadn't had a happy life together or moved towards a glowing future, their first love had not been in vain. They were back there in the past together, and nothing could change or rob them of that.
>
> Fate waited to take them from the terrible present back to the happy days of the past.

> Spreading before him are the past forty years. Memories, numerous memories wave to him and urge him to march forever along the road of the past. The past without end, a never-ending story of loyalty, friendship, brotherhood, comradeship, and humanity (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 227).

In *Dragonfish*, Suzy's response to trauma is similar to Kien's. While the novel is written primarily from the perspective of Robert – a white cop – the narrative is interspersed with Suzy's letters to her daughter. Suzy drifts through life in a walking slumber, 'asleep' ever since she left Vietnam. Suzy writes these letters to her daughter in Vietnamese, because, "it is the only language, the only world, in which I truly exist" (Tran, 2015, p. 105).

As Duc Qui Nguyen writes in his poem, *Language* (D. Q. Nguyen, 2016, p. 395):

> *There are two kinds of exiles –*
> *those who insist on the illusions*
> *of the new country, and those*
> *who obsess over what was left behind*

Suzy, obsessed by what she left behind, can never move on. Her alienation as a refugee is all-consuming: from her country, from her present, from a waking life. Like Kien, and Billy Pilgrim, she has become unstuck in time; though unlike these two she has become marooned in the temporal space of her husband's death, and her flight from Vietnam.

Memories of a Pure Spring, like *Dragonfish* and *Sorrow,* uses a fractured narrative. It starts with the attempted suicide of one of the protagonists (Suong), and ends with the successful suicide of the other (Hung). In between we see the suffering of the war years (a time when their love remained strong), their betrayal after the war by a corrupt regime, and the inevitable destruction of their love. For Hung, returning to the past – via a concert, wherein fellow musician has organised a retrospective of Hung's works, all written during the war – is too heartbreaking a reminder of everything he has lost.

> And I thought I had become accustomed to bitterness. Not so, not so…Everything comes back to me now. All I've lived, accomplished, experienced, in art and in love. Aside from that, my life is a desert. Yes, it's time to leave now. (Duong, 1996/2001, p. 335)

Trauma shapes the narrative of the three novels chosen for this chapter, as it has for so many of the classic noir and neo-noir texts, because so many of the writers of these texts, and/or the protagonists that feature in them were traumatised individuals. This point seems so obvious as to be redundant. It is a point, however, worth repeating, as the linkages between shellshock cinema of the classic noir period, to the PTSD of the post-Vietnam neo-noirs, to the Vietnamese literature of trauma, have rarely, if ever, been made. This is why *Dragonfish* by Vu Tran is apposite for this essay: the deliberate linking of trauma and noir, and the acknowledgment that the tropes of noir are perfectly placed to articulate the dislocation and trauma of war (Tran, 2019). On the US side, *Dragonfish* completes the PTSD story that began with *Taxi Driver*: the plight of veterans *and* refugees, and the decades of estrangement that followed the conflict. *The Sorrow of War* shows the damage done to psyche of the Vietnamese veteran and, indeed, it reveals the collective trauma of an entire country. Through this, the hegemonic impulse to believe American trauma is exceptional is debunked, and a truth of human experience reclaimed by the Vietnamese people.

Ghosts and Memory

While there are clear commonalities in the expression of PTSD in both Vietnamese and Western cultures, there is a major point of departure: ghosts. Belief in ghosts and in the spirits of ancestors is widespread in Vietnam, even today. The discussion here will be limited, in part, because other scholars of Vietnamese literature have devoted whole essays to this subject with great erudition, giving the subject the space it warrants (Gustafsson, 2008; Kwon, 2008, 2017; V. T. Nguyen, 2006). I also limit the discussion, in part, because ghosts have never been a key trope within noir, and thus would appear extraneous to this essay. Yet, there is a link worth reviewing: the nature and ethics of memory *has* been recurring with noir, and ghosts have a particular connection to memory in Vietnamese literature. As Robert Ruen says, of talking to his wife, Suzy: "I once asked her, apropos of nothing, if she believed in ghosts, and she replied that everyone believes in ghosts because everyone has memories" (Tran, 2015).

This aspect of Vietnamese culture helps us more readily understand the impossible history of trauma and mechanised violence in Vietnam. Ghosts are a means through which noir texts may express the extreme psychological states of its characters. Vu Tran says that his stories, for example, "embrace the supernatural and the surreal, to reflect not just an ingrained facet of Vietnamese culture, but also the haunted nature of a historically traumatized people" (Tran, 2019).

If we consider Suzy's definition, we can appreciate one of the reasons that she and almost every Vietnamese character in the three novels sees ghosts. For example, after his battalion is wiped out, Kien writes the following:

> After that battle no one mentioned the 27th Battalion any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World. (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 6)

Though, of course, Bao Ninh not only *mentions* the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade, the real-life scout brigade of five hundred soldiers – he wrote an entire novel about them. His ghosts became Vietnam's ghosts. Bao Ninh, through his character Kien, sought to reclaim the memories of these fallen men and women via the act of remembering. *Sorrow* grants Bao Ninh's ghosts a life in the memories of the readers, both in Vietnam and overseas.

If ghosts represent memories that other more powerful entities desire to be forgotten, then placement of these ghosts in noir texts is an anti-hegemonic act. Ghosts, in this understanding, are truly the casualties of modernity: the deceased soldiers and refugees whose individual identities have been repurposed for a powerful political agenda, or erased if/when they become a hinderance to a preferred historical remembering.

As Viet Thanh Nguyen notes:

> the [Vietnamese] revolution – as well as French colonialism, American aggression, and South Vietnamese nationalism – divided families, persecuted the opposition, killed the innocent, and *struggled to erase the history and the memory of those associated with their enemies* [emphasis added]. (V. T. Nguyen, 2006, p. 12)

If we accept that the three Vietnamese novels selected for this chapter are noir – or have multiple overlapping themes with the noir discourse – then the presence of ghosts in each of these narratives does not detract from this argument. Ghosts, either as reflecting a traumatised psyche, or as mnemonic apparitions of the unjustly killed, indeed are natural fit within the noir universe.

The Impossibility of Return

In *Sorrow*, when Kien returns to Hanoi, his home town, he returns a stranger. The city has changed so completely he no longer recognises it. He locks himself away in his room, obsessing over a manuscript he keeps writing and re-writing, trying to make sense of his fractured memories. When he does leave his apartment, it is to drink himself stupid in dive bars, or to wander the streets aimlessly, at night. Down the dark and alien streets, sometimes in a fugue state, encountering prostitutes and criminals. Hanoi is very much a noir city, for Kien: a morally dark, transient place where he cannot feel at home.

The sense of deflation veterans experience when they return home refers not only to the loss of meaning and vividness of everyday life when compared to the emotional and physical intensity of warfare (though this is a crucial element). It is also the baseness of the post-war life, where the spirit of sacrifice, comradeship, and even love, has been forgotten. Towards the end of *Sorrow*, Kien reflects on a farm he visited when he was fighting in the South, "a symbol of paradise lost" (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 196). Kien and his men come across a place in the highlands, seemingly another world away from the fighting. He meets a farmer and his wife, and shares a coffee with them. It is a simple bucolic scene: a plantation, a wooden house, vegetable garden, generator. "The scent of pine wood from newly hewn logs and fresh coffee brewing seemed to cast a spell over them" (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 198) and they feel like they are part of a family. Kien imagines his friends still alive, in this place:

> working on the land, slashing and burning in the dry season, weeding in the wet. Going to the jungle in the wet season to pick mushrooms and cut bamboo shoots. Catching fish and hunting animals, delivering crops. Hardening calloused hands, broadening muscled backs. (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 196)

As they drive away from the farmhouse, one of Kien's men says to him: "What a peaceful, happy oasis. My lecturers with all their Marxist theories will pour in and ruin this if we win. I'm horrified to think what will happen to that couple" (Bao, 1990/1996, p. 199).

Kien's thoughts are nostalgic, anti-modern, and even simplistic. But they are understandable. To paraphrase L. P. Hartley: the future is another country. Kien, like many veterans (and refugees, who are literally in another country), returns to the future after time-travelling for a decade in the wilderness of central Vietnam. This new world is one he longer recognises. Buildings torn down (or rebuilt, after American bombing), the streets paved, the physical infrastructure alien. The values are alien, as well, without correspondence to the ideals he fought for. Most of all, he is alienated from himself. His idealism and his love, symbolically represented by his girlfriend Phuong, torn from him in the barbaric climax to the narrative. Travelling to the south at the outset of the war with Phuong, the freight train they are riding in is bombed and napalmed by American warplanes. In the conflagration and confusion that follows, Phuong is gang-raped by a bunch of rough men who had been sharing the carriage with them. When Kien finds her, and sees what has happened, he beats a sailor to death (the only one who has lingered at the scene of the crime) with an iron bar. This section unfolds fifteen pages of sustained horror as a young and innocent couple are brutalised by Vietnamese soldiers and American technology. This is their introduction to war, this is the point where their ideals and their love collide with the grim realities of mechanised combat and human depredation.

The darkness of these narratives seems to imply only the darkest of *interpretations* of human nature. But this is not so. As I argue in the chapter on Japan, for all the cynicism, the darkness, the unflinching assessments of the human condition, noir is ultimately a humanistic discourse. Here, it is a critique and a warning against the dehumanising aspects of war,

colonialism, and nationalism. It laments what was lost in history's unrelenting march, when Vietnam become a pawn in the global power plays of a superpower.

Quan Manh Ha argues that making the literature of war available to each side, in translation – he mentions the *Sorrow of War* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* – can "help both sides of the conflict gain a more humanistic perspective of the war" (Ha, 2016, p. 486). Dana Healy talks about all sides learning of the trauma of others. She believes that, through film and literature, we may see a depiction with an "emphasis on being authentically human rather than on a deformation in the name of a particular ideology." (Healy, 2010, p. 346). And Madeline Thien believes *Sorrow* is a "humane depiction of a generation who fought the war" (Thien, 2012). *Dragonfish*, likewise, is a humanistic depiction of the consequences of war and exile. Suzy, while broken by her experiences as a refugee, reclaims the truth of it through her letters to her daughter. *Memories of a Pure Spring* is a lament for the love that could survive an apocalyptic war, but not a base and mercenary peace.

Conclusion

The Sorrow of War and *Memories of a Pure Spring* do not belong to a Vietnamese noir tradition. There was never a noir 'tradition' to speak of in Vietnam, as there was a flourishing of literature that urgently, desperately, wished to deal with the trauma of a long and devastating war. Yet *Dragonfish* – unquestionably a neo-noir novel – reveals the overlap between the experiences of the veteran, the refugee, and the noir form. To again return to Vu Tran's argument, noir is concerned with the "endless permutations and consequences of violence", and in his novel, as in *Sorrow* and *Memories*, we see how "the violence of war moves far beyond the battlefield." As the post-war literature of Vietnam is the literature of trauma, so too has noir long dealt with traumatised protagonists. From the shell-shock cinema of 1940s classic noir, to the PTSD period of neo-noir in the 1970s and 1980s, noir has proven to be the perfect vehicle for capturing the physical and psychological dislocation of the veteran: their alienation, their fractured and missing memories, and their capacity for sudden and shocking violence.

Noir is not a genre. Film and literature may have elements of noir – a mood, tone, and a theme – while not necessarily *being* noir. *The Sorrow of War* and *Memories of a Pure Spring* overlap with noir because their concerns have long been the concerns of the noir discourse. Both novels are anti-hegemonic, insofar as they have mitigated against the dominant narrative of both the United States – which saw American suffering as exceptional, and of the Vietnamese regime – which denied the depth and pervasiveness of Vietnamese suffering altogether. The two novels, it should be re-stated, were both banned (one temporarily, and one permanently), and Duong Thu Huong now lives in exile. Consistent with the noir tradition, both *Sorrow* and *Memories* exposed the corruption of the system, where those who made the greatest sacrifices were forgotten, while those willing to adhere to the correct

political line, and put career above comradeship, prospered. As is true of noir, power here is gathered for its own sake, and the system is not one that can be changed, but rather only endured.

The veteran and the refugee are modernity's casualties. Used up, cast aside, by the caprice of great powers, by the manufactured march of history, by the indifference of a corrupt regime. They either serve their purpose in a dominant narrative, or their stories are erased, exiled, banned. While the literature of trauma may not always sync perfectly with noir, it nonetheless offers a thematic resonance wherein the consequences of trauma may be articulated with both an unflinching realism, and a despairing humanism.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

Capt. Stanley: *Make no mistake, Mr. Burns. It will be done. I will civilize this place.*

Charlie Burns: *The fuck are you talking about, Stanley?*

The Proposition (2005)

Global noir is a discourse on the casualties of modernity. The archetypes of the Android, Gunslinger, Samurai and Private Eye embody the contradictions of rapid and dizzying progress: the conquering and occupation of ancient lands, the invasiveness and ubiquity of new technologies of control, the dark underbelly needed to sustain the bright shining lie of the modern world. The Refugee and the Veteran, I believe, may be added as noir archetypes. They are the casualties of the great powers, and of the craven intransigence of distant elites; they are the price paid by the hubris of generals and presidents. The fractured narrative of noir is a salient means to communicate the trauma of the veteran and the refugee, as are the extremes of climate and weather to communicate the internal desolation and psychological distress of characters throughout noir.

The archetypes of noir cannot change the world. They have not the power. Their story is not one of triumph in effecting change, but an equally important one: retaining one's integrity in the face of a corrupt and mercenary system. Noir is the story of resistance where it is futile, of a commitment to truth where such courage is ruthlessly punished. The anti-heroes of noir are flawed, and broken, and doomed. They are, in short, human beings, and the despairing humanism of noir is epitomized by their fates.

Noir reveals the other side of modernity. As a nation prospers and its politicians tell the story of a growing economy, *Animal Kingdom* tells another: that of a criminal underclass unable to break out of a cycle of violence, pursued by police every bit as ruthless as they. *Goldstone*

and *Dancing Home* tell us other stories as well, of alienation from one's land and culture, of the crass destruction of a pristine environment in order to maintain standards of living. As citizens are told that progress is inevitable, and good; and the god of productivity always right, *Ghost in the Shell* asks: *how much more of this can we take, and still be human?* Where America asserts for itself ownership of the trauma of war, Bao Ninh gently reminds them that *we were human beings.* Where the Vietnamese regime talks of the stoic and universal resistance to the American War, we see Kien, terrified, huddled with his teenage love in the back of a train as it is napalmed and bombed.

Where a global superpower may demand historical justice after a century of humiliation, *Infernal Affairs* and *2046* offer a different version of Hong Kong's future history. Memories are fragile, susceptible to being colonised through the more powerful and vivid rememberings of hegemons. Thus the memories of these films are anti-hegemonic, a way of saying *this is who we were*, and as such, a way of showing *who we are now*. Hong Kong noir exemplifies the way the nostalgia of noir is a means to remember what is lost, without a concomitant desire to recreate the past. The machine memory of noir film and literature delivers nuance in the face of historical certitudes; ambiguity, against monolithic political truths.

Noir has been international from the beginning, when refugees fleeing rising fascism in Europe brought with them to America a lens through which to understand the modern world, darkly. The things Dashiell Hammett saw as a detective for the Pinkerton Agency were not specific to America: the concerns of noir are universal. As the future crashes down us, carrying the world with it, noir reminds us of those left behind. It shows us the price that was paid, the damage done. In the Dark Century, noir is the voice of the voiceless.

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A Better Tomorrow (1986) dir. John Woo, Hong Kong.

A Double Life (1947) dir. George Cukor, USA.

A Fistful of Dollars (1964) dir. Sergio Leone, Italy.

Akira (1988) dir. Katsuhiro Otomo, Japan.

Animal Kingdom (2010) dir. David Michôd, Australia.

Back to the Future II (1989) dir. Robert Zemeckis, USA.

Blade Runner (1982) dir. Ridley Scott, USA.

Bullet in the Head (1990) dir. John Woo, Hong Kong.

Chinatown (1974) dir. Roman Polanski, USA.

City on Fire (1987) dir. Ringo Lam, Hong Kong.

Crossfire (1947) dir. Edward Dmytryk, USA.

Cutter's Way (1981) dir. Ivan Passer, USA.

Double Indemnity (1944) dir. Billy Wilder, USA.

*Drunken Angel (*1948) dir. Akira Kurosawa, Japan.

Fallen Angels (1995) dir. Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong.

Gattaca (1997) dir. Andrew Niccol, USA.

Ghost in the Shell (1995) dir. Mamoru Oshii, Japan.

Goldstone (2016) dir. Ivan Sen, Australia.

Goodbye Paradise (1983) dir. Carl Schultz, Australia.

Hard Boiled (1992) dir. John Woo, Hong Kong.

High and Low (1963) dir. Akira Kurosawa, Japan.

High Wall (1947) dir. Curtis Bernhardt, USA.

Hollywood, Hong Kong (2001) dir. Fruit Chan, Hong Kong.

Infernal Affairs (2002) dirs. Andrew Lau & Alan Mak. Hong Kong.

Ip Man (2008) dir. Wilson Yip, Hong Kong.

Memento (2000) dir. Christopher Nolan, USA.

Mulholland Drive (2001) dir. David Lynch, USA.

Nuoc 2030 (2014) dir. Minh Nguyen-Vo, Vietnam.

One Night in Mongkok (2004) dir. Derek Yee, Hong Kong.

Rashomon (1950) dir. Akira Kurosawa.

Robo Cop III (1993) dir. Fred Dekker, USA.

Running on Karma (2003) dirs. Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai, Hong Kong.

Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987 – 1994) producers. Gene Roddenberry and Rick Berman. USA.

Taxi Driver (1976) dir. Martin Scorsese, USA.

Ten Years (2015) dirs. Kwok Zune, Wong Fei-pang, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun-Wai, and Ng Ka-Leung. Hong Kong.

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The Big Heat (1953) dir. Fritz Lang, USA.

The Blue Dahlia (1946) dir. George Marshall, USA.

The Crooked Way (1949) dir. Robert Florey, USA.

The Deer Hunter (1978) dir. Michael Cimino. USA.

The Founding of a Republic (2009) dirs. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, China.

The Killer (1989) dir. John Woo, Hong Kong.

The Killers (1946) dir. Robert Siodmak, USA.

The Matrix (1999) dir. Wachowskis, USA.

The Proposition (2005) dir. John Hillcoat, Australia.

The Rover (2014) dir. David Michôd, Australia.

Spellbound (1945) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, USA.

Stray Dog (1949) dir. Akira Kurosawa, Japan.

Sunset Boulevard (1950), dir. Billy Wilder, USA.

Terminator (1984) dir. James Cameron, USA.

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